

# THE BED OF THORNS

John Rowan Wilson



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The unexciting marriage of Margaret and Stuart Cardwell suddenly deepens into tragedy when Margaret becomes paralysed. Stuart calls in Adrian Maynard, and patient and doctor, both of whom are deeply enmeshed in social responsibilities, fall in love. Bursting into this difficult scene comes Margaret's brother, Michael. Charming, vague, amoral, he leaves a mounting trail of disaster behind him, the last of his victims being his own sister.

A stranded marriage, a clandestine love affair, a portrait of a "drifter" and "bounder"—out of these elements the story is built up.

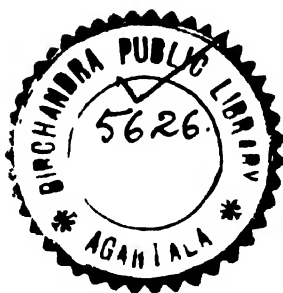




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*by*

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WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD  
MELBOURNE :: LONDON . . TORONTO

**FIRST PUBLISHED 1914**

**PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN  
AT THE WINDMILL PRESS  
KINGSWOOD, SURREY**

## Part One

### CHAPTER I

THE CARDWELLS LIVED IN A LARGE STRAGGLING HOUSE on the corner of the most exclusive lane of what had once been a very exclusive suburb. In this lane, ever since the first days when the mechanical loom had sent the wealth of the world fluttering into their pockets, had lived the only aristocracy the town possessed, the merchant princes of the textile industry. Here gold had been transmuted into wrought iron and verdigris, here an inarticulate passion for grandeur had expressed itself in a profusion of sombre ornamentation, fixed unhappily on to a background of sickly yellow brick. Yet, ugly as the houses were, they could not be completely despised. They represented something, an uncouth, uncompromising vigour which was the virtue of their age. One might laugh at their gargoyles, their domes and turrets and porticoes, their pretentious gardens, the foliage grimy with smoke from the tall chimneys—but now, in 1950, the laughter was wearing thin. Life in those spacious interiors, it was remembered, had not been such a bad thing after all.

The textile slump, followed by the steep increases of taxation and acute shortage of servants during the Second World War, had taken its toll of them. Now only a few were left in the habitation of single families—the others had been converted, mostly into flats, one or two into hostels or schools. The Cardwells had remained, fortified by a certain dynastic sense, and guarded from the fluctuations of the market by an almost uncanny prescience on the part of Stuart Cardwell's late father. For Stuart himself, it was generally agreed, had no business sense at all.

As Maynard entered the hall, he heard the faint, exquisitely wistful notes of the second movement of the 'Pathétique Sonata'. Stuart played well, but with a delicate hesitancy of touch that was essentially amateur. Those plaintive chords were almost too appropriate to a family catastrophe. Maynard wondered for how long Stuart had sat waiting for him in the study, preparing to be 'discovered' playing the piano.

Stuart appeared not to notice him at first when he went into the study. Then, looking round, he jumped up with a start.

"My dear fellow, I'm so sorry. You must have come in very quietly. And one gets absorbed. . . . But I'm sure you understand. You're a musician yourself."

Maynard shook his head. "I don't play any instrument."

"No, but you have the feeling for it—that's what matters."

He spoke with intense seriousness, and with a didactic, almost schoolmasterish, tone. Whatever anyone might think of his capabilities in other matters, he implied, on this subject he was an expert and proposed to be regarded as such. His face bore the habitually querulous expression of a man who had never attained the respect he considered his due. He was small and slightly built, with a fair, pink complexion and prematurely white hair which he brushed straight back from his forehead so that it curled up a little behind his ears. His eyes were a pale, watery blue and he had practically no eyelashes. He reminded Maynard of a delicate subterranean animal which had been dragged, blinking and protesting, into the light of day.

"In times like these," he said, "I turn instinctively to my Bechstein." He stroked the polished wood fondly. "I suppose it sounds silly to many people but I derive great comfort from it."

"I don't think it's in the least silly."

"No, of course you wouldn't." Stuart took his arm and led him to a chair. "That's because you're one of the few civilised people I know. There aren't many of them round here, unfortunately. Have a cigarette"

"I don't smoke."

"No, of course not." He seemed to be having difficulty in knowing how to begin. "I want you to know, Maynard, how grateful I am for what you did for me when I was so depressed. You gave me an entirely new light on things."

"I'm glad I was able to help you."

"And I feel I should explain that I wanted to call you in in the first place, but Margaret——" He said the word in a hushed, funereal voice, as if his wife were already dead. "You know how it is."

"I understand perfectly. In fact," said Maynard with sincerity, "I'm glad you had the doctor. It makes it easier for me."

"It's good of you to say so." Stuart stood by the mantelpiece, nervously smoothing back his hair over the crown of his head. "I suppose I'd better tell you what it's all about."

"Please."

"Well—it was a sort of collapse. It occurred quite suddenly. She had what appeared to be a fainting fit and when she woke up—she was paralysed. No movement in her legs at all." His eyes blinked rapidly several times and he looked down at the carpet. "It's really terrible."

"Is it just her legs?"

"Yes. So far, of course," he added hastily, as if determined to overlook no gloomy possibility.

"And how is she taking it?"

"Very well. Remarkably well, I might say. She's quite astonishingly cheerful."

"Indeed?" A small cloud of anxiety which had been hovering over Maynard's mind ever since he had left home, began perceptibly to lift.

"You think that a good sign?"

"Certainly I do. Has your wife ever had anything like this before?"

"Never. She's always been a very healthy woman."

"And can you think of anything which might have precipitated this—fainting attack?"

Stuart coloured with embarrassment. This w/s plainly a question he had been anticipating.

"Yes, as a matter of fact there was. I might as well be frank with you. It occurred at the end of a rather—unpleasant episode between my wife and myself. Not exactly a quarrel, you understand. There was nothing personal about it. It was just that we took opposite attitudes about a very difficult situation that had come up. We both got a little heated."

"Would you like to tell me what the situation was?"

"Is it really necessary?"

"Not if you don't wish to."

"I'd rather not, if you don't mind. It's extremely delicate—a family matter. It concerns my wife's brother."

"Is he here?"

"Yes." It was impossible for Stuart to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Yes, he's here. Would you like to see him?"

"Not just now. Later, perhaps." Maynard thought for a moment and then got up from his chair. "I think I'd like to go up and see your wife now."

## CHAPTER II

AS THEY WENT UPSTAIRS, Stuart said, "Thank you for coming so quickly. I hope you hadn't to cancel anything important."

"Just a few routine consultations."

He felt a pang of conscience. It offended him to have to indulge in such petty deceptions. On the other hand, it would never do to admit the truth, which was that his appointment book was almost empty and that for some months his expenditure had monotonously exceeded his income. His was a seasonal trade, which flourished in the long, damp, depressing evenings of midwinter. In summer months there was a tendency to throw melancholy aside, and Maynard with it. Another hot summer, he thought despondently, and he was finished for good.

His affairs had actually reached a crisis that very morning. He had the letter in his pocket now, the letter he had so foolishly opened before starting his breakfast, in the wild hope that it might contain some unexpected stroke of good fortune. It was a short note from his bank manager, asking Mr. Maynard to call and discuss certain matters at his earliest possible convenience. At this point, Maynard's scrambled eggs had become suddenly unpalatable. He had pushed his plate ostentatiously away.

"It's no use," he said. "I've no appetite this morning."

He waited for his wife to ask him why, but she did not. Her head was buried in the morning paper, which she made a great pretence of reading. That it was no more than a pretence he knew. Her powers of concentration, intellectually speaking, were small, and she was easily distracted from a book or a play—she had no real taste for ideas. Only in the field of personal relationships did she show her strongest qualities, a shrewdness and tenacity of purpose that astonished and often frightened him.

The indirect approach had failed. She was, he realised unhappily, in a resistant frame of mind. He would have given a great deal to have left the matter over but this was unfortunately impossible. Something would have to be done very soon. Time was running short.

"Vera!"

"Yes?" She lifted her head. There was something birdlike about her thin features and quick delicate movements. She had never been a beautiful woman, but she had always possessed a certain attraction, which had hardly diminished at all with the years. It was founded on her more durable characteristics, the dark eyes, the sleek black hair, the tiny small-boned figure which moved with the same decision and energy at thirty as it had at twenty-two. She would grow old quite suddenly, thought Maynard. A primitive, emotional being, she would not experience the gradual, protracted senescence which is the mark of the highest products of evolution. The hypothesis was comforting. In the meantime,

though only five years her senior, he felt often in her presence immeasurably old.

"Do you mind putting down that paper? I want to talk to you."

"What is it?"

He said ponderously, "Money." He picked up the pile of bills from beside his plate and handed them to her. "I can't think why we find it so difficult to live within our income."

She handed the bills back. "These are mostly necessities—food and clothing."

"I hardly spend anything."

It was meant to be an accusation but lost its force half-way through and became merely a grumble. There was an alert aggressiveness about her which deterred him. He threw the slips of paper into the wastepaper basket.

"They'll have to wait," he said. "I daren't overdraw any more at the moment." He held up the letter. "This is from Fanshawe. He wants to see me."

He voiced a universal grievance. "It's typical of bank managers—they never insult you until you've got an overdraft. Then you're helpless. You can't very well threaten to take your business elsewhere."

"I never liked Fanshawe. You remember I advised you to transfer your account months ago."

"Did you?" He had a poor memory, and usually allowed these proofs of his wife's intuition to go by default. He went on broodingly, "I know what's in Fanshawe's mind. He thinks I'm a—an unstable person. He's not prepared to take any chances on me. Simply because I'm out of the conventional rut. . . ." The memory of his humiliation rose up in his throat like a wave of sickness. "God! How I hate these provincial towns."

He put his head in his hands. It was at times like these, when weakened by anxiety, that he found it difficult to do the most essential thing of all, to fight off recollection at all costs and think only of the future. For there was little in the past to encourage him, and much that might tempt him to despair.



It was as if he had been by some superior force condemned always to seek for truth where it was most difficult to find, and, once found, to disseminate it only to those who cared nothing for it. The first stage had not been so bad. In the theological seminary at Carlisle, in the anatomy lecture theatres of Edinburgh University, he had not doubted for one moment that there would be a successful result to his quest. He had had confidence then, not only in the truth, but in himself. The truth, at any rate, was left.

He had now no doubts about the truth, so few indeed that he no longer asked himself specifically what it was. Maynard was a man of faith. Born of a devout Nonconformist family, he had in his adolescent years allied an unquestioned belief in his religion to a profound, if haphazard, curiosity about modern scientific advances. He had a fine voice and a persuasive intensity of manner. He was tall and thin, with a slight stoop and a habit of craning his neck forward as he looked around him which gave an impression of intellectual profundity. His long white face had an austere, enigmatic attraction. It bore an expression of melancholy, arising partly from the consciousness of certain spiritual dilemmas and partly to a chronic digestive disorder which had pursued him since childhood. It was inevitable that he should enter for the ministry.

He formed an ambitious concept of his task in life—it was to reconcile the theology of his fathers with the discoveries of psychology and sociology. He pursued his researches with zeal and it was only at a fairly late stage that he realised the catastrophic result. Somewhere, he never knew quite how, in those years of enquiry, the object of it all, God, had mysteriously disappeared. He made a few abortive efforts at recapture, but without success. He left the theological college for good.

The following years had been hard. To Maynard the problems which obsessed other young men of his age were of only secondary importance. Without faith, he was lost, and it somehow seemed just, that what science had taken

away, science should restore. He found it more difficult than he had thought. Science, so lavish with information, became coy when asked for a system by which it could be applied to the aspirations of the human spirit. Edinburgh University, the Communist Party, the London School of Economics, all failed him in their turn. It was in a course of lectures delivered by an obscure French professor under the auspices of the British Council that he finally found the answer.

Professor Delabord's theory of personality was not one which could be easily explained in a short compass. It was complex and confusing, and it was alleged by his opponents that the more comprehensible parts of it contained certain irreconcilable contradictions. To Maynard, however, the main points of it seemed clear, and he was indifferent to the implausibilities. To a man who had once believed implicitly in every word of the Old Testament they seemed an insignificant obstacle to surmount. He was weary of the inconclusive logic of scientific thought and homesick for generalisation, for dogma. He had found the purpose of his life. Delabord was a great man, but a theorist, a thinker. It was for him, Maynard, to translate the theory into terms of the individual, to apply it to the benefit of countless suffering unfortunates who had been mentally maimed by the stresses of industrial civilisation.

The rest of his life had been the story of his attempts to do this in face of every conceivable difficulty. His wife, he found, was unimpressed by the importance of his mission. Even Professor Delabord had let him down. After labouring for two years on a book designed to express in popular terms the essence of the theory, Maynard had sent it to Delabord for approval. It had come back with a testy note complaining that Maynard had utterly mistaken the point. The professor flatly refused to write a foreword and gave only grudging consent to the dedication. Maynard consoled himself by reflecting that the professor was growing old.

The book had sold better than he expected. Fortified with a somewhat lurid title and a dust jacket of ingenious design,

it had attracted a certain amount of public interest, now long since subsided. Several copies still remained prominently displayed on his bookshelves. He had arrayed his books carefully, in a line which expressed his mental development, starting with the Bible and working through Havelock Ellis, Pavlov, Freud, Jung, Marx, Weatherhead, Matthias Alexander and Delabord. At the end stood his own work, the distillation, the quintessence of these heterogeneous sources of enlightenment.

His mind returned to immediate problems. He said, "It's maddening. I really feel we have a chance here. If only they'd give me another few months to get properly established——"

"We seem to have the rottenest luck." She said it resentfully, as if bad luck were a disease he had communicated to her by marriage.

He frowned. His system did not recognise the existence of luck, except in the broadest terms: the accident of birth, the chance of being assaulted, defenceless, in the cradle or the womb.

"You over-simplify. One has to take the larger view." His voice took on a professional toleration. "I'm breaking new ground. It's necessary to destroy a lot of superstitious rubbish that's been cluttering up people's minds for generations. Naturally there's resistance. But, in the end, progress is bound to win. All the time, we are gradually moving forwards."

"So you say. But when I look back, I can't see we're any better off than we were five years ago. Why, when we went to Bristol——"

His face turned white. She was watching him closely and he knew that the stroke had been deliberate. These pre-meditated strokes of cruelty were always a painful surprise to him. His eyes wavered from hers, searching desperately round the room for refuge. Among his treasures, the books, the albums of Beethoven piled up beside the gramophone, he looked for comfort and found none.

He said with an effort, "I thought you agreed——"

"I don't know what we agreed," she said impatiently. "Life's difficult enough, without having to be careful not to mention things we both know about. Why are you so frightened of a name?"

Her voice had risen almost to a shout. She was working herself up into one of those spasms of rage which were her invariable reaction to criticism.

"If you can't be considerate," he said, "you might at least be discreet. Bertha may hear you from the kitchen."

He had struck a weak spot. She was very sensitive about preserving her dignity before the maid. Her anger subsided.

"I'm only thinking of your own good," she said, in a more normal tone. "It's not healthy to bury your head in the sand. You should know that, if anybody does." She pushed away her plate and lit a cigarette. "Have you heard anything more from Cardwell about that job?"

She spoke as if nothing had happened. Maynard was a man who liked to follow a subject to its end and he found such sudden changes of topic and mood bewildering. He tried to adjust his thoughts.

"Not yet," he said.

Her question was pertinent. For some time now, the Maynards had rested great hopes in Stuart Cardwell. He was the ideal, the daydream, of an unorthodox and struggling practitioner. When Maynard thought of him it was not so much as a man, but as a symbolic figure representing opportunity. He was rich and influential, yet at the same time receptive to experiment and enthusiastic in discovery. He was tormented by secret fears and indecisions which expressed themselves in a variety of physical symptoms. He was suggestible. He was credulous, with the supreme, self-confident credulity of the intellectual. He had responded happily to treatment and had become Maynard's most constant and profitable disciple.

He was the seat of intense, but short-lived, enthusiasms. His most recent fad was an exaggerated concern for the health of his work-people. He had tentatively proposed a scheme,

without definitely committing himself, under which Maynard should become a salaried official, employed by his company, to act as consultant on their physical and mental welfare.

"I think you ought to press him," said Vera. "A thousand a year would be just what we need at the moment."

Maynard began to feel on firmer ground. He said confidently, "I have to handle him properly. I know what these business men are like. At the present moment I have an ascendancy over him. But once he gets the idea that I'm dependent on his money. . . ."

"If you're too casual, he may think you're not interested."

"Oh no. I've had discussions with him about it. I pointed out to him that it would actually save him money. In a factory like his, with all those girls working—it's an ideal place. Not just from the point of view of sickness. It's their whole attitude to their job, their efficiency, their relations with the management. One could do an enormous amount of good." The expression of melancholy faded for a moment from his face, as inspiration took over. "It would be a great opportunity."

His fancy went soaring. It would open up a new field—to apply himself not only to the individual but to the mass. To him, money was unimportant beside the necessity of propagating his doctrine on as large a scale as possible. Though, of course, there had to be a sufficiency of money, if only to satisfy his wife's needs and free him from this sordid anxiety. A salary was the thing, a settled, non-fluctuating income that gave the mind a chance to concentrate on higher things. And if he was successful, the possibilities were limitless. He could give lectures, start a training school. . . .

The telephone rang, jerking him back to the contemplation of immediate problems.

"That'll be Mrs. Crabtree, cancelling her appointment again."

He went out into the hall to answer the telephone. When he came back his eyes were shining with excitement.

"That was Cardwell."

"About the job?"

"No, it's his wife. He wants me to come and see her."

"Is she ill?"

"Yes. I couldn't quite grasp in what way. He was pretty agitated. She's had some sort of collapse. The best part is—he's already had a couple of doctors in and they couldn't do a thing." He rubbed his hands. "This is just what we've been waiting for."

She said dubiously, "Yes, I suppose so. . . ."

His elation was clouded by her lack of response. "What are you looking so thoughtful about? Can't you see what this means? It may be the turning-point in our lives. Cardwell's an important man. He knows everybody who matters in the district. It'll be the most magnificent advertisement. And as for the job at the factory—he'll be begging me to take it. What's worrying you?"

"It's just that—supposing you can't do anything for her?"

He laughed. "You've never had any real faith in me, I'm afraid."

"Yes, but——" She hesitated. "Couldn't it be something incurable, something that nobody could do anything about? After all, those two doctors——"

"If the doctors knew their job, I shouldn't be where I am."

"All the same—the job at the factory's the main thing, isn't it? You may be treating Mrs. Cardwell for months before you can send in a bill. We need to be certain of the job before that. I should mention it to him today."

He was irritated by her insistence. It was hard for a man in his position to be inflicted with an enemy in his own home. Vera made no secret of her lack of confidence in him. To him, with the prospect of a dramatic success within the next month or two, his financial difficulties now seemed trivial. Good material for a biography—"Chapter 2: Early Struggles." But it was not for him to reproach her. No one knew better than he the intrinsic nature of belief.

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

### CHAPTER III

TO MARGARET CARDWELL the world had suddenly taken on a new, more circumscribed, aspect. At its centre was herself, her body with its useless limbs, the large comfortable bed in which she lay. Spreading out from her, their significance diminishing rapidly with distance, were the objects around her. The books by her bedside, the flowers, the furnishings of her room. At the very periphery were the french windows which led on to her balcony, wide open now to let in the full warmth of the June sun and the scent of the garden. Through them she heard the sounds of the other world outside, voices, the crunch of cars on the gravel path, the far-off noise of traffic from the road beyond the trees. She listened to them as a dweller in a seaport town hears the hooting of the ocean liners in the estuary, without curiosity, without envy. They had no relevance for her.

She felt no resentment against the limitations which her illness had so arbitrarily imposed. This world, she found, had considerable advantages over the one she had so recently inhabited. It was quiet—one had time to think. There were people in it, of course, that was unavoidable, but they were few—Stuart, her brother Michael, and the trained nurse who attended to her wants, a woman of commendably taciturn disposition. Even they were subject to restrictions. They had to be considerate and refrain from bothering her with problems, they must come when she wanted them and leave as soon as she felt tired. She had unlimited time for reading, for contemplation and reminiscence.

She was at first afraid that they might realise with what unhealthy complacency she regarded her disability. She was, on occasions, a little shocked herself and tried to encourage a more suitable attitude by contemplating the appalling consequences of being permanently paralysed. She found she could not. In spite of everything, she remained obstinately

cheerful. And as for the others, the truth never occurred to them. Her previous reputation for extreme, even excessive, energy stood her in good stead. They marvelled at her courage.

Only the doctors had disturbed her tranquillity. Dr. Summers, of course, was a person of no significance; a mere intermediary through which to call in specialist advice. But Capstick, the consultant, had been a different matter altogether. He had been dictatorial, even insulting. Debonair in a black pin-stripe suit with an embroidered piqué waistcoat, he had paced up and down the room disseminating an odour of unidentifiable perfume, and lecturing her as if she was a class of students. He had given her unpalatable, impracticable advice, and shrugged his shoulders impatiently when she refused to take it.

She felt more confident of Maynard. She had never met him, but she had heard a good deal about him. She knew him as a protégé of Stuart's, and the author of a book which she had been given to read but found far too tedious to proceed with. He would, she felt sure, regard it as a great honour to be allowed to treat her. She was not in any danger of being bullied.

His appearance, when he came into her room, confirmed this impression. There was a sensitivity about his eyes which she found reassuring. He looked like a man with no sense of humour but a sincere desire to help. He was probably not very well off. She noted with sympathy that his suit was badly cut and his trousers baggy at the knees. The briefcase which he carried was old and battered. She compared him favourably with the odious, immaculate Capstick.

Her approval was not free from a shade of patronage. One of the things which appealed to her about him was that he had no innate authority. He was put under the necessity of having to convince her of his value. She could listen to him and then take his advice or disregard it as she chose. He had no body of opinion, of tradition, which he could produce in an attempt to overawe her. He had, she thought, with a



sudden realisation of his loneliness, only himself to offer in support of whatever claims he might make.

"This is Mr. Maynard, Margaret," said Stuart. He spoke with an exaggerated respect, as if anxious to set the tone for the interview.

"How do you do?" Maynard fumbled with his briefcase before finally deciding to set it down by the bed as he shook hands.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Maynard." Her smile was affable, but condescending. "We have great hopes of you."

"I hope I shan't disappoint them."

He had, she noticed, an extraordinary voice. It was strong and resonant, yet not oppressively so. It gave the impression of being capable of infinite adjustment, so that it could be equally at home in the confines of a room such as this, or in filling, without apparent effort, the spaces of an immense hall. The voice had an assurance that seemed to go beyond that of its owner, as if it were in some way above his control. When speaking, it communicated some of this quality to him. He was like a man whose self-confidence is fortified by the presence of a wealthy and influential friend.

When Stuart had gone out, she said, "I suppose you've had a talk with my husband?"

"Yes."

"Has he told you all the details?"

"Up to a point. I gather you collapsed following a severe shock, about a week ago."

"Yes," she said. "Some sort of breakdown, I suppose. Then when I came round I couldn't move my legs. I haven't been able to move them since."

"That must be very distressing for you."

"Of course."

She might have been speaking of somebody else, discussing over afternoon tea a catastrophe that had happened to some casual acquaintance.

"If I may say so, you seem to be taking it very stoically."

"I might as well, mightn't I?" She was, for a moment, on the defensive. "There's no use putting my head in my hands." As if repeating the words of somebody else, she said, "We have to face facts."

He said, "You sound as if you were quoting somebody."

She gave a rather embarrassed laugh. "I suppose I was. It's a phrase my brother's always using."

"And does he?"

After a short pause for thought, she said, "Do you know, I believe he does."

"I should doubt it."

"But you've never met him," she pointed out.

"No. But on general principles - few people face facts. If they face anything, it's a certain interpretation of facts—a very different thing. The interpretation may be wrong. It usually is wrong."

"In your opinion."

"Exactly. In my opinion. What else should I believe in?"

"You'd set it against everything—tradition, the weight of accepted authority?"

"Yes. I think we ought to judge by results. Accepted authority has failed. God knows," he said, "we've given it its chance. We've believed and believed and believed and what's the end of it? Individually and collectively—disaster."

"But why should I believe you?"

"No reason at all—for the moment. You no doubt regard me as a crank, a crackpot. There's no reason why you shouldn't. The only justification for my existence is that I'm right and that others are wrong, that I can do something that nobody else can."

"Such as what?"

"For one thing," he said, "I can cure your paralysis."

She looked at him, a little puzzled. She should have been irritated and repelled by these grandiose pretensions. She had started off with the suspicion in her mind that the man was a charlatan, and he had said nothing that could not have been used as confirmation for such a view. But, somehow—

it was perhaps something in his manner, a hypnotic quality in his voice—such an attitude was difficult to maintain. He spoke, not as if making claims for himself, but rather as one chosen by a higher power to be the intermediary by which the truth should be made known. It was an occasion for pride, but for humility also. She knew that, whatever else, she would not now be able to doubt his sincerity. He was not offering her what she had expected, a bottle of quack medicine, a hashed-up dose of popularised psychology. . . . She pulled herself together. This was all very well. The man had a certain fascination, there was no doubt, but he must not be allowed to get away with a confidence trick. What was he, in fact, offering her?

"When it comes down to it," she said, deliberately brusque, "what are you—a faith-healer?"

He showed no sign of offence. This type of reaction was not new to him. It was especially common in rich people who did not like to have their self-possession shaken. He regarded it, on the whole, as a favourable sign.

"Is it so vital to fit me into a category?"

"Naturally I'm interested to know what you're going to try to do." Now was the time to make her position clear. "You may not think it, but I'm a moderately intelligent woman, Mr. Maynard."

Without speaking, he got up from his chair and walked over to the window. She noticed that his hair, thick and curling at the sides, had fallen away at the crown of his head to leave a small bald patch, like the tonsure of a monk. This, combined with his sombre expression and his unfashionable suit, with the dark jacket cut high at the neck, gave him a suggestively clerical appearance. She found herself wondering if she had offended him, and, more surprisingly, hoping she had not.

"I'm sorry," she said eventually. "Perhaps that was rather rude."

He turned round to face her. "It's quite all right. I can see how you feel. But there's nothing very mysterious about

me, or what I do. I simply have certain views about what people are like and how they ought to look at things. I'll tell you them all in due course."

"But how does that effect me—my illness?"

"Your paralysis is of functional origin—that is to say, a purely mental thing. Your attitude's quite typical. Besides, if it had been anything else, Capstick would have found it out. He's by no means as silly as he looks."

"So you think I'm a neurotic?"

"That's a meaningless term—pure jargon. Besides, as you'll see later on, it doesn't matter in the least what I think of you. The important thing is what you think of yourself. But I'd like you not to ask too many questions at the present stage. It only impedes progress."

"Very well, then. What do you want me to do?"

"Have I your co-operation?"

"So long as you can convince me."

"That sounds perfectly fair. I think you might start off by reading my book." He opened his briefcase and took out a copy. "You may have seen it before."

She flushed. "My husband has it."

"But you never read it?" He smiled, one of his rare, wintry smiles. "Never mind. You may find it more interesting, now that you can refer it to yourself."

Maynard left with the conviction that he had done a good morning's work. He was not above feeling satisfaction at the perfection of his own technique. The truth, he had found by experience, did not advertise itself—it had to be put over. At a first interview it was essential to establish oneself as the person in command. With Margaret he anticipated no real difficulty.

A housemaid met him at the foot of the stairs.

"Mr. Cardwell's in the garden, sir. He'd like to see you before you leave."

"Thank you. I'll find him myself."

He found Stuart leaning on a stone balustrade, gazing dis-

consolately at a pool of goldfish. He turned round eagerly as Maynard came up to him.

"Well?" he asked.

"I think I can get her right for you."

"You can? That's wonderful!" As if afraid that he might have revealed a previous doubt, he added, "I knew you wouldn't let me down. But it's a great relief to hear you say so, all the same."

"You mustn't worry too much."

"The trouble is—that I feel, in a way, responsible."

"I should put that out of your mind. You've always had a tendency to accuse yourself."

"But what makes it more complicated is that I'm convinced I was in the right, even now. There was no other way to act. How could I know she'd go off like that?"

"You couldn't, of course."

"No, that's right, I couldn't," said Stuart, as if compelled to admit the logic of Maynard's remark. "How long will it take to cure her?"

Maynard became thoughtful. "It won't be a matter of days. She can't be rushed. You'll have to be patient. It'll certainly take weeks, probably months. But don't worry," he said reassuringly. "If circumstances permit me to finish my treatment, I can promise you success."

"Circumstances?" said Stuart. His alarm was all that could have been desired. "What do you mean?"

"I hope to stay here for the next few months. But I can't be definite. I have a friend in London who's engaged in the same sort of work. He's pressing me to join him."

"But—look here, Maynard, you can't leave me in the lurch at a time like this —"

"Mr. Cardwell," said Maynard, with a touch of severity, "you must try to appreciate my point of view. What I'm doing at the present is all very well, but it's a drop in the ocean. If my work is valuable, it should be extended over as wide a field as possible. There's a great deal to be done among people who can't afford to pay individually for it.

My friend," he said pointedly, "has had a promise of financial backing."

Stuart winced. It was an issue he had been evading. "As I told you before, there is a possibility here—in my own firm——"

"Possibilities," said Maynard drily, "are all very well. But time is passing. My friend is waiting for an answer."

Stuart's face contracted in a habitual attitude of defence. His features seemed to huddle together for mutual protection. "It's a question of squaring it with the other directors." As Maynard made a gesture of impatience, he went on hurriedly, "But I'll have a talk with them. Please don't rush into anything."



## *Part Two*

### CHAPTER I

MAYNARD HAD BEEN RIGHT in one respect. Margaret found that his book, which she had started and laid aside when Stuart had given it to her on a previous occasion, now interested her extremely. This was not entirely due to its application to herself. Now that she had met its author, she found herself reading it as if it were a speech delivered from his own mouth. The sentences took on the inflexions of his voice, the arguments were reinforced by her memories of his personal charm. Many points which might have seemed questionable became less so under these circumstances, and even when he was obscure (which was not infrequent), she felt an unaccustomed inclination to put this down to her own lack of understanding rather than to any defects in the writing.

One of the most seductive qualities of the book was its air of certainty. It was good to come across somebody who knew, or at least believed he knew, what was unquestionably the right thing to do. Of course, there were others—her parents, for instance. But their suggestions were in direct contradiction both to her inclinations and her experience of life. They bore no relation to the real problems that concerned her.

The application of Maynard's theories were as yet an unknown quantity. The basic theme of the book was (and this in itself she found attractive) in complete contradiction to the values her parents had set up for her. It was a denial, not only of traditional obligations, but of personal responsibility. The key sentence, the confession of faith, came in the last chapter.

'It will be asked then, "Is man responsible for his actions?" The answer is short: save in a very restricted sense, he is not. It is the influences that have been brought to bear on him, the relentless pressure of society which has weighed on his developing mind since early childhood, which must accept responsibility. Such influences, it must be stressed, are for the most part exerted with the very best of intentions, but this only makes them the more sinister, since more difficult to combat. It is one of the hardest tasks with which a man may be faced, to act against the expectations of those who believe in him.'

This, at least, thought Margaret, was clear. And that it was at least partly true she had no doubt. Whether it was a complete explanation of the succession of events which had brought her to her present position was more difficult to say. For that, it was necessary to go over carefully what had happened.

She had been married now for eight years. It had not been the marriage she had dreamed of, a union of mind and body so complete, so inevitable, as to leave no question of any other possibility, an understanding so profound that its permanence could be taken as a matter of course. It had not been that sort of marriage at all. It had been, rather, a convenient arrangement entered into by two lonely people of superficially similar tastes, both convinced that experience and a tolerant attitude of mind could substitute effectively for the flashier yet less durable emotions of romantic love. It was, in fact, the usual marriage between a woman of twenty-seven and a man of forty.

It was a marriage that had been forced on Margaret by circumstances over which neither she nor anybody else had much control. The first of these was her personal appearance. Physically, she had been born at an unfortunate time. Her statuesque proportions, in another age or even in other countries, would have placed her as an extremely attractive woman, if not as a beauty. Her features and complexion



were good, but she was above average height and built heavily in proportion. Without her clothes, she had the opulent sensual charms which would have fascinated Rubens, but by the standard of the monthly magazines which reflect the sexual preoccupation of twentieth-century man, her breasts were too large, her hips too generous, her thighs too broad. She was a Juno, a Brunhild.

It was small consolation to her that she attracted the genuine if slightly sympathetic admiration of her own sex. Conscious of a lack of competition, they felt they could afford to be generous. It was agreed that she was a very handsome woman and that it was astonishing that nobody had ever carried her off. It showed, without question, the stupidity of men. She would, they asserted when safely married themselves, make an excellent wife for somebody.

Another factor was that she had been born into an uneasy station in life. The Hasletons were not rich, but they were well-bred and enormously respectable. They affected to despise the textile magnates for their vulgarity, though secretly they were impressed by their wealth. Mr. Hasleton was a Civil Servant with a comfortable income but no capital to speak of—he believed that money was of minor importance and that the most important gifts a person could have were character and breeding. He had sacrificed a great deal of his personal comfort and security in giving both his children a public-school education.

The family lived in good style and mixed almost exclusively with people better off than themselves. Mr. and Mrs. Hasleton were snobs, of a mild, inoffensive kind. They had certain out-of-date prejudices which led them into difficulties. When Margaret left school they found it hard to decide what she should do. She had shown no special aptitudes. It was considered out of the question for her to work in a shop or as a shorthand typist, and there was little else she was fitted for. In the end Mrs. Hasleton suggested that she should take a course in Domestic Science and help at home.

This, Margaret soon realised, was another way of saying

that she would no doubt soon be married, thereby solving the problem automatically. She was quite agreeable to this conception. At eighteen, there seemed to be a great deal of time ahead of her, during which a suitable husband would be sure to come along. She was, in any case, not in any great hurry. For the first two or three years she was quite happy to explore the new and strange world of adult, or semi-adult, life. She discovered, in common with many others, that a young girl fresh from school, provided she is not irredeemably awkward or plain, has certain advantages denied to young men of her own age. They learn quickly to be graceful and self-possessed. They need very little money. Their social role is essentially passive and they are not tormented by the complexities of wine lists and the oppressive ritual of tipping. They have the charm of novelty, and are much in demand.

It had not occurred to Margaret to analyse the basis of this early popularity. If she had, she would have realised how temporary it must be. It took several years for her to grasp the essential fact that she was taking part, not in a gay, communal exploration of life, but in a competition—a competition in which the prizes were being gently filched by her friends from beneath her unsuspecting nose.

The invitations began to fall off. Her novelty was a thing of the past, and she had a basic seriousness of mind which many of her friends found disturbing. She was too tall to be in demand as a dancing partner, and too fastidious (as well as too cautious) to acquire a reputation for promiscuity. Her brother Michael was still away at school and there was little work to do about the house. Time began to hang heavy on her hands. After some consideration, she announced her intention of going out to work.

"Why?" said Mr. Hasleton irritably, "aren't you happy at home?"

"I'm bored," she said. "There's nothing to do."

He took up the querulous, baffled attitude common to so many middle-aged people in a rapidly changing society. When he was young, girls had not complained of boredom,

or, if they had, he had not known about it. As usual when ruffled he chose to exaggerate. He was not going to have his daughter, after an expensive education, standing behind a counter in Woolworth's or carrying round afternoon tea in a stockbroker's office. (He had once lost money on a stockbroker's advice and always spoke of them with great contempt in consequence.)

Margaret let him ramble on. She had found that he usually beat himself by this manoeuvre. His fevered imaginings made his real proposals look quite innocuous by comparison. When he had finished, she said, "I'd thought of being a librarian."

He searched around for something unpleasant to say. "In the local Post Office?" he finally enquired.

"No. A proper librarian. You have to take a course."

"Another course? Nobody seems to do anything without courses these days. I suppose I shall have to pay for it. Then it'll turn out to be no use, like the other one."

"Well, at least you can't say it isn't respectable."

He put up the paper, a sure sign that he was beaten. "If you're not careful, you'll end up with a fringe and horn-rimmed spectacles."

It was said half as a joke, half with the intent to wound. Its effect was greater than her father would ever have wished it to be. It was, Margaret realised as she remembered it, the first real sign that there was a conflict between her parents and herself as to how her life should be lived. It was apparent that she was failing to live up to their expectations. That in itself was upsetting enough, but what was even worse was the undeniable fact that the reproach was unjust. Her father's expectations were out of accordance with reality. He was accusing her, not of failing to do something, but of failing to be something which he considered he had every right to expect her to be. In other words, he had no conception of the sort of person she really was.

His disappointment was easy to understand. He made no secret of his belief that, for a girl in Margaret's position, marriage was the only satisfactory career. For himself, too, it

was the solution of a problem. As soon as he retired on a pension, he would have difficulty in supporting himself and his wife in their accustomed style, and, in addition, there was Michael to start in life. To him, Margaret was beautiful, cultured, and attractive; he could see no reason why she should not make a suitable match, except by her own wrong-headedness. He feared that she was in danger of ruining her chances by being classed as an intellectual.

As time passed it became apparent that his fears had substance. Margaret had grown weary of the humiliating task of exhibiting herself as an attractive proposition on the marriage market. She developed an interest in literature, and pursued it with reckless self-indulgence. She found she enjoyed her new work. She developed a new circle of friends, older and less exacting. With them she discovered that she had at least one aptitude which was out of the ordinary. With her quick brain, her capacity for concentration, and resolute personality, she was a natural card-player. She found herself, almost unwittingly, acquiring a reputation as an expert at contract bridge.

In a more tolerant metropolitan culture these might have seemed slender grounds on which to be condemned as a blue-stocking. But in the world of Margaret Hasleton they were more than sufficient. She became classified as a thoughtful girl, a sensible girl, a capable girl. It was useless to protest. She could not even, by her dress, do anything to eradicate this unfortunate impression. Gay clothes looked ridiculous on her, and in high heels she towered over the rest of the company like a grenadier. The most she could strive for was an air of elegance. She was forced into dressing neatly, smartly, sensibly. . . .

In course of time she became alarmed. She could see that she was working herself into a false position. She knew only too well that she was not born to be a competent spinster. Disillusioned by the realisation that her parents were incompetent to guide her so long as they persisted in a picture of her which tallied with nothing but their own inclinations, she

had tried to formulate a scheme of life for herself. She had strong passions and a desire to accomplish something in the world, perhaps not through herself (for she was modest about her own abilities) but at least as a help and support to somebody more talented. She visualised herself as the devoted wife of a man of her own station in life, perhaps a surgeon or a barrister, even a writer or musician, but, if so, a successful one—she had no taste for picturesque poverty. He should be a man some years older than herself, poised, cultured, yet with a sense of humour. She had confidence that she could be a good wife to such a man.

She found her ideal elusive. As she grew older, she learned to recognise the only two types of men to whom she was consistently attractive: young introverts, lacking in self-confidence, who needed her support in their losing battle against life; and men of experience approaching middle age, who wanted someone they could talk to as well as sleep with, and found a mature woman much less complicated than a pretty little creature who might grow emotionally attached to them.

She had been in a state bordering on desperation when she first met Stuart Cardwell. She was approaching thirty, and it seemed that some power, some supremely remote and indifferent power, had decreed that her life was to be a failure. Her attempt to be dignified and put a brave face on her disappointments had, if anything, made matters worse. It had become accepted that she was resigned, when in fact her resentment towards a malicious Providence had grown, year by year. She was in a frame of mind to take any chance, no matter how great, to break through the web of futility in which she had become entangled.

She first saw him at the library. He came in now and then to look through some of the rarer musical scores, and he could be seen in an alcove, his white head bent over the pages, and occasionally tapping his foot on the floor or wagging his finger in the air to remind himself of the rhythm. She had put him down as a reader in the Faculty of Music—he had

not the air of authority one associated with a professor. His manner was donnish and self-conscious. She noticed, without any great interest, that he went out of his way to speak to her, asking unnecessary questions and making nervously humorous remarks. She wondered idly whether he would ever pluck up sufficient courage to carry their acquaintanceship any further.

It was not until several weeks afterwards that she found out who he was.

One evening she found her mother in a state of suppressed excitement.

"I came across Moyra in town today," Mrs. Hasleton said.

Moyra was a friend of Margaret's at the library, a thick-set, enthusiastic girl with a taste for gossip.

"Oh yes?"

"She tells me," said Mrs. Hasleton archly, "that you have an admirer."

She was addicted to such archaic terms of speech. Her ideas of the relations between the sexes were still expressed in the idioms of her own use, despite all the efforts of her children to correct her. This was partly due to an extreme indolence of mind which, having laboriously learnt one set of conventions, was loth to embark on the effort of acquiring another. In Mrs. Hasleton's world men were 'attentive'; girls, if they were not very careful, were 'compromised'; it was only with reluctance that she had accepted the passing of the chaperone.

"I don't know who you mean," said Margaret, with faint irritation. "Unless it's that little man who hangs about at the library."

"Yes. That's the man she was telling me about. Have you any idea who he is?"

"None whatever. Somebody to do with the Faculty, I suppose."

"No. That is, not unless he's on the Board of Governors or whatever they have. I wouldn't be surprised."

Margaret looked at her mother in amazement. It had never

occurred to her that he might be a person of any importance.

"Well, who is he, then?"

"It's Stuart Cardwell—you know."

Margaret did know. In her social circle the Cardwell family was frequently discussed. Old Mr. Cardwell had been a well-known personage, a local grandee. It was well known that his son had been a disappointment to him. Stuart had not only remained a bachelor, robbing the old man of the grandchildren he regarded as his due, but had acquired a reputation for eccentric and effeminate tastes. He openly admitted to being uninterested in business, and spent much of his spare time in the City Hall, listening to string quartets. What was even more offensive, he had prospered in spite of this. It was calculated, by those who were experts at this sort of speculative arithmetic, that considering what the old man had left, and taking into account the present market value of Innes and Cardwell Ordinary shares, that Stuart and his mother must be worth something in the nature of a quarter of a million each.

It should not, of course, have made any difference. But Margaret found, to her discomfort, that it did make a difference. She found herself hoping that she had not been too chilly in her responses.

"Why didn't Moyra tell me?"

"She didn't like to. You're rather aloof, you know. I think she was frightened of being snubbed."

"How absurd! Not that it matters," she added hastily.

Mr. Hasleton put down his book. It was one of a series of volumes sent out by an organisation which believed that everybody should know in detail all the most appalling features of the present European situation. It was a depressing book, and though he took a certain melancholy pleasure in the confirmation of his own views, he found the necessity to be distracted from it now and then.

"If I were you," he said, "I wouldn't bother with him. Everybody knows Stuart Cardwell's a ninny."

Margaret found herself resenting his tone. There was a

hidden snobbery in it which annoyed her far more than her mother's naïve worship of wealth. It gave him obvious satisfaction to be able to adopt a contemptuous tone about people so rich as the Cardwells.

"I don't think he's a ninny," she said, unconsciously pretending to a knowledge of Stuart greater than she actually had. "He's a little shy, that's all. And just because he has certain interests that people are too stupid to understand——"

"I see." Mr. Hasleton took a deep breath and nodded several times. "I'm stupid." And he retreated, behind his book for the rest of the evening.

This was merely one in a series of incidents which developed between Margaret and her father. It seemed to her as if he was looking for opportunities to be offended. At the root of his attitude was a deep disappointment with her, both for failing him in herself and for supporting her brother Michael, who was at that time engaged in a series of disastrous experiments in choosing a career. She was unable to accept his attitude on either of these matters, and suffered from a sense of injustice. This expressed itself in a reaction against all his expressed wishes. When she next saw Stuart at the library she encouraged him to a much greater degree than before.

He was obviously pleased at this change in her attitude, but did not, as she had rather hoped, respond in any positive way. She began to wonder if he was quite satisfied with such an inconclusive relationship when she received an invitation to dinner with the Reid-Smiths.

Mr. and Mrs. Reid-Smith were old friends of the Hasletons. Though almost as old as Margaret's father and mother, they were childless and led an active social life. They liked to think of themselves as younger than their age, occupying a place somewhere between the two generations. They had 'taken up' Margaret and obviously regarded it as a grave injustice that she had been left on the shelf. They were so kindly and anxious to help that she was amused rather than angry at their occasional attempts at match-making.

As soon as Margaret arrived she saw the state of things very



plainly. There were only the four of them there, and the Reid-Smiths had nothing whatever in common with Stuart. It was an arranged meeting, but as to who had planned it, she could not be sure. Probably a hint thrown out by Stuart had been enough.

•Stuart was shy at first, but gradually gained confidence. The Reid-Smiths held the belief that food and drink were infallible remedies for any form of social awkwardness, and the dinner was excellent. The claret was equally good, and had the added merit of giving the men something to talk about. It soon became apparent that Stuart knew more about vintages than Mr. Reid-Smith. Margaret was amused to note the change in his manner when he realised this. He became suddenly more self-assured, even a little patronising.

As they sat drinking coffee, Margaret congratulated Mrs. Reid-Smith on the dinner.

"Yes, indeed," said Stuart. He took a prim sip of his liqueur. "A Trimalchian banquet."

A baffled look came on to Mrs. Reid-Smith's face, while her husband made great play of lighting a cigar. She gave a nervous little smile.

Margaret said, "I hope you're not going to compare Mr. Reid-Smith with Trimalchio."

"No, no, of course not," said Stuart, with an air of slight confusion. "I was referring to the quality of his hospitality. I'm sure everybody realised that." He looked at Margaret with curiosity. "You read P<sup>o</sup>troni<sup>u</sup>s?"

"Only in translation."

"Even so—it's most unusual to meet a young woman who knows anything about the classics."

"I suppose you've read the original?"

He hesitated for a moment, as if wondering whether to chance it. Then he shook his head sadly. "No, I'm afraid not. My classical education was incomplete—it's one of my greatest regrets. When I was young, music was so important to me that I neglected my other studies." He gave a sigh. "Now, of course, it's too late."

"Yes," said Mrs. Reid-Smith, at last finding something to hold on to, "but you can't do everything, can you? Stuart's very musical, you know, Margaret."

Stuart winced, and looked at Margaret for sympathy. Mrs. Reid-Smith went on, "You must play the piano for us."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said decisively. "I only play to please myself—and most of the time I can't even do that. Besides, I'm sure everybody would much prefer bridge."

Mrs. Reid-Smith very wisely did not insist. They played bridge for the rest of the evening. Stuart was an adequate player but it was obvious he had no great enthusiasm for the game. Between the hands he would engage Margaret in conversation on various topics, to the irritation of Mr. Reid-Smith, who believed in doing one thing at a time. She had the feeling that she was being tested, to make sure that she was in fact as educated as she had seemed to be. She did not resent this. On the contrary, she found his interest flattering, and if his questions were faintly reminiscent of an examination, she felt at least that he was only too anxious for her to pass. Mrs. Reid-Smith was delighted, and gave her husband an occasional kick under the table when he grew too openly impatient. Every now and then she would put in little remarks to play up one of the pair to the other. Margaret was embarrassed, but, to her surprise, Stuart appeared quite unconscious of what was going on. When Mrs. Reid-Smith made admiring comments on his erudition, he blushed in a pleased and rather attractive way, like a precocious schoolboy. It seemed to Margaret that, though he looked on the Reid-Smiths as intellectual inferiors, he was not above showing off before them.

When Margaret went up to the bedroom to collect her coat, Mrs. Reid-Smith said, "I hope you've enjoyed your evening."

"Very much indeed."

"I'm so glad. I was hoping it would be a success, and I think it has been, don't you? He's really a very nice man, though a little reserved. He was always very studious as a

boy. I'm afraid he's miles above my head most of the time, but you seemed to get on with him very well. He needs drawing-out. Of course," she added cryptically, "it's his mother who's the real trouble."

Margaret did not ask her what she meant by this, though she would have liked to do so. Mrs. Reid-Smith, she could see, was aching to tell her. But she had the feeling that matters had gone far enough. She had no desire to enter into an open conspiracy.

Stuart had offered to give her a lift home. She had been impressed by the complete lack of ostentation in his manner and dress, but his car was a different matter. It was an enormous Rolls-Royce of the newest and most expensive type, and looked altogether too large for him. He drove it nervously, as if afraid that at any moment it might escape from his control.

Margaret commented on its magnificence. It was too monstrous, too anachronous, to ignore.

"You like it?" he said.

"It's beautiful. But not really in keeping with your personality, I think. It needs a fat, bulky man with a cigar."

She wondered whether he might be offended, but he merely sounded worried.

"You think it ostentatious?" he asked, with an air of concern.

"No, just a little overpowering."

"And I'm not?" He thought for a moment. "You're quite right—I'm something of an introvert. Still, that doesn't mean I shouldn't have a decent car, does it?"

"Of course not." She began to wish she had never mentioned it. It was her first introduction to a characteristic of Stuart's that later provided one of the most nerve-racking features of their married life—a tendency to seize upon the most casual remarks made in conversation and discuss them as if they were prepared statements, bristling with hidden inferences.

"I really bought it because of my mother. She can't stand

vibration—it makes her feel sick.” Margaret nodded understandingly. He went on in an aggrieved voice: “But that’s the sort of thing nobody thinks of. It seems to be a crime now, to own anything decent. It’s all this Socialism. Often when I’m driving along I can see people looking at me as if they could cut my throat, just because I’ve got something they haven’t.”

The last thing Margaret wanted to talk about was Socialism. She changed the subject.

“One would never take you for a business man,” she said.

He laughed. “Well, really, of course, I’m not. I run a business because that’s where circumstances have put me. I regard it as a cross I have to bear.”

“Couldn’t you have done something else?”

He shook his head. “My father insisted. He was a man who always got his own way. And it’s a way of making a living. If I had taken up something else I should simply have exchanged one dull job for another.”

“Surely all work isn’t dull?”

“All work except creative work—that’s the only form of work worth doing.”

“Then why not do that?”

“Because I can’t,” he said sadly. “I’ve got no talent. So, you see, I’m something of a misfit. I was born without the one thing essential to my happiness.”

“Can you be sure of that?”

“Yes. There’s no doubt of it, I’m afraid. I suppose there’s no reason why the desire and the capacity should occur in the same person. As it is, I employ my leisure in appreciating the achievements of others.” He grinned. “Petronius, for instance. You must have thought I was tactless about that.”

“Not really. The Reid-Smiths didn’t know what on earth you were talking about.”

“Yes, but that’s tactless in itself, isn’t it?” He added, disarmingly, “I suppose you thought I was showing off by talking above their heads. I have a reputation for that.” He did not wait for her to answer, but went on, “You see, I don’t

see why the lowbrows should have it all their own way. When I think of the number of times Reid-Smith tormented me with the cricket scores. . . . Why shouldn't we talk about the things that interest us?"

There was a change of tone in this last remark. It was a clear invitation to Margaret to allow herself to be enrolled in this resistance movement of his. He went on to say, in the slightly stilted manner of a man not used to paying compliments to women, what a great privilege it was to meet a girl, and an attractive girl at that, who had interests above house-keeping and clothes. Margaret protested, begging him not to overrate her. It was gratifying to have made such a good impression but she was afraid that she might not be able to keep it up. He brushed her protests aside. She began to suspect that he was so anxious to find a kindred spirit that the slenderest evidence would have been enough. When she left him they had arranged to go to a concert together the following week.

Theirs was a restrained, almost secretive, courtship. Stuart seemed anxious that their relationship should arouse as little interest as possible. They were almost always alone. He became shy and embarrassed if they met other people that they knew and he took great trouble to avoid this. They dined at expensive but unobtrusive restaurants, where the manager had instructions to give them a table almost completely hidden from the public view. Afterwards, on the way home, he would take her on a roundabout route and then stop, always at the same place, in a tree-lined cul-de-sac off a country road, and make tentative love to her.

She thought often of what she would do when he asked her to marry him. He was not, she had to admit, exactly what she had visualised. On the other hand, he had many pleasing qualities. He was kind and generous. He talked well when they were alone, though not so well when there were others present. He had read widely, and it pleased him that she was anxious to learn from him. She would borrow his books and

they would discuss them afterwards. Though sometimes she found the concerts to which he took her exhausting, she sat through them with fortitude and made no complaint.

She saw him as a man misjudged by those who were eager to seize on every superficial weakness, every sign of variation from the herd, and to condemn what they did not understand. She herself felt misjudged, and this drew her closer to him. He had, without question, a brain and an artistic understanding well above the average, which she believed that only lack of confidence had prevented him from exploiting. It was not, she felt, too late for this deficiency to be rectified.

She tried to face honestly the question of money. It was futile to pretend that it had no influence on her. It was attractive to think of herself as the mistress of a large house, with a car of her own and an unlimited dress allowance. She would be fawned upon in shops and hotels. She would be able to travel, if she wished, and not under the jaded and patronising guidance of Thomas Cook's representative. She would be the dismay and envy of her women friends, who had long since given her up as an old maid.

Over the next six months they became increasingly intimate, Stuart, she could see, had now become quite dependent on her, but he made no mention of marriage. The obstacle was presumably, as Mrs. Reid-Smith had hinted, his mother. She was a chronic and exacting invalid who exerted an unhealthy dominance over the whole household, and over Stuart in particular. Margaret was beginning to think she might have to bring matters to a head by threatening to break off their relationship when one night he rang her up.

"I'm afraid I've had some very bad news," he said, in a sepulchral voice.

Margaret's heart leapt.

"What is it?"

"My mother died suddenly this afternoon."

"Oh, Stuart—how awful!" She tried to sound as concerned as possible.

"Yes. It's hardly unexpected, of course, but all the

same——” He heaved a gusty sigh, obviously for her benefit. Over the telephone it was hard to tell whether he was genuinely sorry, or just showing an appropriate emotion. “We were very close—very close.”

“Yes, I know. You must feel terrible. Is there anything I can do?”

“Nothing, I’m afraid. Except——” his voice cracked “—be as good a friend to me as you’ve always been.”

When Margaret left the telephone she knew that her future was settled. He needed her—there was no doubt about that.

She went into the lounge to tell her parents the news.

“Perhaps now,” said Mr. Hasleton sourly, “he’ll be able to afford to get married.”

## CHAPTER II

THEY SPENT THEIR HONEYMOON IN ITALY. It was, Stuart said rather pretentiously, his spiritual home. Indeed, he felt positively afraid, every time he went there, lest he should not have the strength of mind to come back again.

It was at this time that certain difficulties became apparent which Margaret never succeeded in resolving. She began to realise that intellectual compatibility, while an excellent basis for friendship, was altogether too fragile a foundation to stand the stresses and strains of married life. She had underestimated the importance of character.

This was shown in a complete change in her attitude towards certain peculiarities of his which she had often noticed before, but to which she had attached no great importance. She had viewed them dispassionately, as from outside. But now she found that, as his wife, she was in some way identified with him so that these characteristics were in part her responsibility. She could not laugh at them and dismiss them as before. Loyalty made certain demands.

This was no new situation to her. She had the same feeling of identification with her parents, and to an even greater degree with her brother. But as far as Michael was concerned there was a difference. His numerous faults were a burden to her, but a burden she was glad to take because of an essential sympathy between them. With Stuart, she discovered to her dismay, this sympathy was absent.

He was a man devoid of all spontaneity. Everything had to be planned, thought about, talked about. If Margaret suggested some improved arrangements, he would first agree—the idea was amusing. But then he would sink into silence. A short time later he would begin to analyse the idea. There were certain disadvantages which it would be foolish to overlook. He could argue convincingly, and by the time he had finished he had killed her wretched improvisation stone-dead. They ended up invariably by following his original plan.

His was a tortuous attitude towards life. He had no belief in simple explanation or simple policies. His method of getting to know her in the first instance had been typical of him. He was beset by curious, exaggerated fears. In his attitude towards others, he gave the impression of a foreigner striving hard to understand the ways of a people completely alien to him. He endeavoured to systematise them and fit them into groups; to make them tally with his reading.

His reading, though wide, was uneven. He had an aversion for many aspects of contemporary life. "The twentieth century has been a ghastly mistake," he once said. His interest in literature and the drama stopped abruptly at the time of the beginning of the First World War. Emotional situations on the stage which Margaret found absurd were perfectly sensible to him; he firmly believed that he could obtain an insight into women from a study of the antics of Carmen, or Paula Tanqueray. He countered disagreement with dogmatic obstinacy. "People don't change," he would say, shaking his head wisely.

To him, women were passionate, jealous, unreliable. They



Iso had a certain frightening fascination. His confusion was increased by an addiction to works of psychology, one of the few modern discoveries which had attractions for him. Its laborious analyses and classifications, its esoteric theories of personality, its constant probing into motives, were congenial to his academic mind.

The prospect of indulging for the first time in sexual relations perturbed him. There was so much to remember. Afterwards, he said to Margaret, "Was it all right?"

"Yes. It was wonderful," said Margaret mechanically. In fact, it had been neither a revelation nor a disappointment, but simply much what she had expected.

"No," he said in a worried voice. "I know it wasn't. You just don't want to hurt my feelings. That's true, isn't it?"

"After all—it was the first time. . . ."

"But it's important to get these things right from the beginning. The roots of most unhappy marriages lie in sexual matters—that's been proved. The important thing is to be frank and discuss it sensibly. If there are any difficulties we can rectify them."

"Don't you think we might give instinct a chance first?"

"That, if you don't mind my saying so, is just an expression of subconscious prudery. Now, if you'll just tell me exactly——"

Margaret was tired, and her whole body ached for sleep. She could never remember afterwards what she said, but it appeared to satisfy him. It gave him something to work on. He had brought with him a series of books on the subject, some in the original German, and spent a good deal of time in poring over them. The fruits of his labour became gradually apparent to her. She was conscious that new techniques were being introduced. His deliberation was maddening. It was like watching a nervous golfer driving off from the first tee—starting with a series of elaborate addresses to the ball, and gradually working up to the final desperate and somehow despairing swing. She reflected that in love, as in golf, there was no substitute for a natural sense of timing.

After a fortnight, he said, "It still isn't right."

"Don't you think," she suggested gently, "it might be better if we didn't try quite so hard?"

He looked startled. "What do you mean?"

She found it difficult to explain. In spite of his insistence on frankness, it was hard to have to tell a man that his *ars amatoria* smelt of the lamp.

"Aren't you taking it far too seriously?"

"It's impossible to take it too seriously."

"It may take months for us to get used to each other. I think you're striving for perfection too early."

He said, with the solemnity with which he always discussed his own characteristics, "As you know, I've always been a perfectionist."

"You can't excel in everything."

He said bitterly, "Something would be enough." After a pause he asked, "You had other men before me?"

It would have been childish to deny it. "Of course."

"How did you get on with them?"

She looked at him curiously. Each day, she thought, one discovered something new. The Stuart she had known during their engagement was no more than a thin free-hand sketch of this man who lay beside her now. Day by day, the colours, the shading, the perspective, were filled in. She saw into a depth of self-pity, a perverse desire to be hurt, which she had never suspected.

"Why don't you answer? Are you afraid I'd be jealous?"

"It's over and done with. I don't feel inclined to spend the night hashing over my old love affairs."

She must have spoken more sharply than she intended. He was easily wounded and could always be silenced by a rebuff. He never mentioned the matter again.

During those four weeks abroad they lived in a state of uneasy equilibrium. It was plain to both that something unexpected had occurred, and they were neither of them sufficiently insensitive to underestimate its importance. For long periods of time it could be ignored, for superficially they got on as well together as before. Margaret felt intermittently

ashamed of her own intolerance when she considered the trouble he took to please her. He was an excellent guide and spoke the language fluently. She learnt more about the country from travelling with him than she could have done on half a dozen such visits on her own, or with a woman friend. They lived luxuriously. When Stuart was in the mood, he could be not only instructive, but amusing—he had a lively sense of humour which alternated with fits of depression. She could, it was true, have wished for a slightly less enthusiastic attitude towards all things Italian. It would have been a pleasant relief to find that he disliked chianti, or found Milan Cathedral something of a bore.

But throughout these pleasant days there was always a suspicion at the back of her mind that there was something about him which was basically intolerable to her. It was as if she were taking a form of food which tasted pleasant in the mouth, but which she knew instinctively would poison her. Sometimes, quite suddenly, she would be overpowered by disgust.

It was on what was to be the last evening of the holiday that this suspicion was confirmed. The incident was trivial enough. They were staying in Florence, and due to start for home the next day. Stuart had told her of a small inn, on a hill just outside the town. One could sit on a balcony, drinking a glass of wine, and enjoy a breath-taking view of the sunset, with the dark red light reflected from the river and the lamps twinkling in the labyrinthine streets on either side of it. It was a perfect setting for the last night of a honeymoon.

He had not exaggerated. As they sat there she felt closer to him than ever before. Gratitude for his kindness, his sensibility, swamped her previous fears. At last the moment had come when they had no need for words to understand each other. He put his hand over hers on the table—a thing he would never have dreamed of doing in England. At that moment a voice called, "*Inglese!*"

Stuart started and withdrew his hand. There was only one person beside themselves on the balcony; a rough, unshaven

man dressed as a labourer. He was sitting at a table drinking strega.

Stuart said something to him. Margaret knew no Italian, but she guessed that he was asking the man what he wanted. The man replied, in an unpleasant tone of voice. Stuart looked confused, as if he did not know quite what attitude to take. Then he moved his chair so as to have his back to the man.

"What did he say?" asked Margaret.

Stuart frowned. "I can't understand it. I asked him quite civilly if he wanted to speak to me and he just said the English were a lot of bastards."

"He must be off his head."

"I don't know. It's really most unpleasant. I wish I'd never brought you here."

"For goodness' sake, don't worry about me."

The man began to talk again, in the same hoarse, mumbling voice. He would throw out a sentence, then grin through his discoloured teeth, and sip his liqueur, watching them all the time. There were long pauses while he thought of something else to say.

"This is intolerable," said Stuart. "I suppose I ought to call the proprietor and have him thrown out."

He made no move to do so.

"Oh, let's not make a fuss," said Margaret.

"This district's riddled with Communism, you know."

The man's tone changed. His next remark was accompanied by a leer, and was directed at Margaret.

"What's he saying now?"

Stuart's lips tightened. "Something I couldn't possibly repeat."

Margaret looked towards the man. As their eyes met, he made an indecent gesture with his fingers.

"I don't think he's a Communist," she said with conviction, "I think he's a lunatic."

This last exploit was the man's undoing. Unknown to anybody, the padrone had been standing in the doorway leading to the inn. He said a few words in a low, rapid voice.

There was a short argument. Then the man drained his glass of strega, threw a few dirty notes on the table, and went out.

They stayed for another quarter of an hour, but the spell was broken. Their silence was no longer companionable. Stuart answered questions absent-mindedly and it was obvious that he was brooding about the incident. "I don't think we've heard the last of that fellow," he said.

When they went out, he made a careful examination of his tyres, and was relieved to find that none of them had been punctured. He started to guide the big car down through the steep, dirty streets of the village. There was no light anywhere.

"Everybody seems to have gone to bed," he said.

He jerked sharply round a right-angled bend and then suddenly crammed on his brakes. Margaret was almost thrown through the windscreen. There, about ten feet in front of them, parked obliquely across the road, without lights, was an old Fiat delivery van.

"Really!" cried Stuart in exasperation. "As if we hadn't had enough to put up with——"

"Isn't there any chance of getting past?"

"Not the remotest." He sat back in his seat and half-closed his eyes, as if anxious to extract the last drop of bitterness from his misfortunes. Margaret waited for him to suggest some solution but he made no sign of movement. His inactivity began to annoy her.

"What are you going to do?"

"What can I do? The thing's been presumably left here for the night."

"Is there no other way?"

"There is a path," he said reluctantly, "but it's just a cart-track. It's not suitable for a car of this size. We should probably get stuck half-way down."

"Then what——" Suddenly her eye was caught by a light in one of the houses. "Look. There's somebody there! It's probably the owner of the van."

A figure appeared in the window which they both recognised. It was the man they had seen at the inn.

"He's done this purposely," said Stuart.

"Stupidity, more likely."

"He must have known we would be coming down this way."

"Well, tell him to stop being such a fool."

He said, in a tight voice, "I haven't the slightest intention of getting out of the car."

"Then shout at him. Blow your horn."

He said nothing. She was beginning to lose her temper. Her anger sprang not only from the situation itself, but also from a savage disappointment. Only a half-hour ago, under the influence of the wine and the sunset, she had thought that all might be well. Now she felt her respect for Stuart waning again. He seemed incapable of coping with the simplest form of crisis.

After a moment's reflection he pressed the self-starter.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

"I'm going back. We can try the other road."

She said contemptuously, "Are you afraid of him?"

He sighed. It was as if he had received a piece of bad news which was always more than half-expected. "It's astonishing how primitive even the most intelligent women are, once one scratches the veneer."

She tried to attack his pride. "He'll think you're an absolute ninny."

"I'm completely indifferent to the opinion of a half-witted Italian peasant."

He was ridiculously, pathetically supercilious. She knew she had hurt him deeply and within her was a feeling that this had gone far enough, perhaps already too far, which tinged her anger with despair. Yet stronger still was the desire to hurt, to take revenge on him for her disillusion.

"And what about me? Don't you care what *I* think of you?"

He did not reply. At least, she thought afterwards with gratitude, his delicacy had saved her that—the necessity of saying in so many words that she thought him a coward and despised him for it. But it was nevertheless clearly understood.

The cart-track turned out to be just passable, but so uneven

that it broke a front spring on the car. They arrived back from their honeymoon two days late.

### CHAPTER III

THIS WAS THEIR FIRST QUARREL and, if not the last, at least the last of its kind. Ever afterwards they were a little more guarded in their dealings with each other, realising only too clearly how easily the unforgivable might be said. Relations between them appeared superficially to be excellent, and even if their friends had been allowed to share their secret intimacies, no very unfavourable impression would have been given, for they were as cautious before each other as they were in front of strangers. And it was this very caution which showed to each of them privately how seriously things were going wrong.

In the meantime they lived, to all outward appearances, the normal lives of married people of their station. It was the sort of provincial existence which Margaret could only have found tolerable if shared with someone who satisfied the basic needs within her, so that all else would seem of minor importance. As it was, she was tormented by moods of violent dissatisfaction, in which she felt that the precious years of her life were wasting away to no purpose. In between these moods came phases of temporary acceptance, when she wondered whether, in spite of all her instincts to the contrary, she was becoming reconciled to a state of affairs which could never be more than second best.

There were, of course, attempts, futile attempts, to force Stuart into being the type of man she had always visualised as a husband. She found it at first difficult to understand the difference in intensity of their desires. One of his most constantly reiterated statements was the one that he had made on their first meeting—that the only kind of work worth doing was creative work. It was obvious that his greatest satisfaction

would come from producing some work of art, however minor, of his own. She determined to encourage him in this, even bully him a little if need be.

"But I've told you," he said plaintively, "I can't do it. I haven't the talent."

"How do you know? You always tend to underestimate yourself."

"That's true, I suppose. But all the same——"

"At all events, you could try. You know a lot about music. . . ."

He shook his head impatiently. "You don't realise the gulf between the amateur and the professional. You can't compose as a sort of Saturday evening hobby. All composers of any value have been professional musicians."

"Then write something."

"Such as——?"

"Goodness knows. It's not for me to tell you. But if you really mean what you say——"

He was caught on the raw. "Of course I mean what I say. If there's one fault I haven't got, it's intellectual dishonesty."

He allowed himself to be persuaded, making his compliance something of a favour, a feminine whim to be humoured. He formed the habit of retiring to his study for two hours every evening, with strict orders that he was not to be disturbed. He gave these instructions with great solemnity, as if conscious of complying with an artistic ritual.

A few weeks later, almost coyly, he presented Margaret with a sheaf of manuscript.

"Of course," he said, "it needs revising."

She sat down to read with a feeling of having achieved something. She wished fervently for this enterprise to be a success. It would mean so much, not only to his happiness, but to her own. She pictured him, under the influence of a little acclamation, developing into a confident, expansive person worthy of her respect.

It came as a shock to her, on reading his work, to find how far he fell short of even ordinary professional competence.



Stuart could talk fluently and with occasional wit and it had seemed to her that he had only to set down the better parts of his conversation to be entertaining. But on paper, she discovered, he was a different man. His style was laboured and prosy, his imagery commonplace. There was a patronising flavour about his prose, as if he recognised his reader as a person of inferior culture to himself but was prepared to overlook it. She lingered over the last page as long as she dared. She did not want to discourage him, but if she was to be of any help at all it was necessary to give him some indication of her opinion.

Before she could speak, he said, "I want you to be absolutely honest."

He looked at her closely. Seeing the dubious expression on her face, he said, "You didn't like it?"

"I wouldn't say that. I liked parts of it."

"And the other parts?"

"I'm no expert. But don't you think it's—well—a little stilted?"

He sat back in his chair and looked fixedly at the ceiling. "Naturally I didn't, or I wouldn't have written it like that, would I? What is it that you found—stilted?"

"It's difficult to say. It's just the general impression that's a bit schoolmasterish, if you see what I mean. I think you could do something better."

"I'm sorry you find my style so repellent."

"Now this," she said desperately, "is just what I didn't want to happen. You asked me to be honest and now you're annoyed."

"I'm not in the least annoyed."

"But you are—you know you are! It's impossible to talk to you if you won't even admit to your own emotions."

"In that case it's hardly worth trying, is it?"

He left his chair and picked up the manuscript from the table. He looked at it in distaste and then threw it into the fire.

"Oh Stuart, you fool, why did you do that?"

"It's of no further significance."

"Something could have been made of it. If you'd worked over it again——"

"I've no longer any interest in it."

"Aren't you going to try something else?"

"I don't suppose so."

He went back into the study, where he consoled himself with Bach for the rest of the evening. She knew that she had failed utterly. So far from bringing him to life, she had simply added to the list of things they did not mention.

This list became longer with the years, eventually reaching a sort of finality when every conceivable tender spot had been touched upon. They were in the curious position of understanding each other intellectually, but being so far apart in emotional matters as to have no contact at all. The blame, Margaret reminded herself, was not Stuart's. The difficulty was not that he had faults, but that by ill-luck they were the faults which she could neither comprehend nor forgive—weakness, timidity, and a series of complex defensive reactions arising from them.

The degree of understanding which they had was in many ways even a disadvantage, since it prevented the concealment of unpleasant truths. It was impossible to hide from Stuart the fact that she found him unsatisfactory as a husband. He was always conscious that people despised him as a weakling, and took a perverse pleasure in recognising manifestations of this. Frequently he was over-subtle, and saw slights where none were intended. It was not possible to convince him that he was wrong. He simply nodded his head once or twice, as if to say, 'I see that you, too, misjudge me. It is only what I expected.' For all his wounded pride, there was a certain smugness at having caught somebody out.

They had one child, a girl, born in the second year of their marriage. All through her pregnancy, Margaret had nourished hopes that the introduction of this new force into her life would somehow help towards a solution of her problems. It was soon apparent that this was not to be the case. The

advent of Catherine, indeed, rather emphasised the delicacy of her position with Stuart. She became something in the nature of a disputed territory, where their separate interests were always in danger of coming into conflict. They were so conscious of the necessity for keeping the peace that they each became excessively wary of trying to capture the child's affections. As a consequence Catherine grew up a silent, moody child, deprived of any intimate contact with her parents, and always something of a mystery to them.

Margaret felt uneasy about her, but her maternal instincts were never strong enough to break through an arrangement which she had earlier decided was the only tolerable basis for her married life. She persuaded herself that it was better for Catherine in the end to be brought up by a nurse than to be the innocent victim of an emotional tug-of-war.

Stuart, too, was by no means an ideal father. Though he occasionally professed to be shocked by Margaret's indifference to the child, his own concern was only sporadic. He had theories on child-rearing which he expounded constantly and with emphasis, though he preferred to leave others to put them into practice. He hated to be distracted, and if the baby disturbed his concentration by crying or demanding attention for some bodily function, he would retire immediately to some distant part of the house. These disturbances were a matter for resentment, since it was his belief that under proper management they could be easily avoided.

The only occasions when he showed any direct personal interest in Catherine were when she was ill. A confirmed hypochondriac himself, he had taken the trouble to arm himself with a great deal of ill-coordinated medical knowledge. His pessimistic outlook led him to place the gloomiest interpretation on all symptoms, and he was never free from a suspicion that he himself was in the early stages of cancer or tuberculosis. If Catherine developed the slightest malaise, he instantly feared the worst, his anxiety being increased by pangs of conscience if, as often happened, he had hardly looked at her for weeks previously. He made veiled accusa-

tions of neglect, and insisted on taking personal charge of her treatment, dosing her with patent nostrums until the tooth was cut, or the attack of diarrhœa cleared up of its own accord. When she was better, his enthusiasm began to flag. It was a matter of time before she did something to irritate him, or showed an unresponsiveness to his advances which he found ungrateful. Then he would retire from the nursery and wrap himself in seclusion till the next crisis developed.

They had, as might have been expected, a succession of nurses. The constant tension between herself and Stuart, which became apparent sooner or later to anyone who lived constantly in the house, worked on their nerves and made them unsettled. Many would not conform to Stuart's views on management, which were 'progressive' and excluded any form of discipline. They complained that, while he objected to the child misbehaving, he deprived them of any form of control. To this Stuart invariably replied that they were not carrying out the system properly.

It was in this connection that she first became conscious of Maynard as an influence, not only on Stuart, but also indirectly on the whole household. Stuart, having exhausted all conventional medical advice for a series of more or less imaginary ailments, had begun to explore the more unorthodox byways in search of somebody who really 'understood' him. His natural good taste, and a sense of the ridiculous which worked fairly effectively where other people were concerned, had saved him from exploitation by the cruder variety of quack. But with Maynard he had found something new. The man, he explained to Margaret, was intelligent and cultured. He had an interest in music—a recommendation in itself. He had written a book. His ideas, not at first easy to understand, were fascinating in their implications, though as yet, of course, unproved on any large scale. They had, said Stuart, given him a new attitude towards life.

To please Stuart, Margaret had professed to enjoy the book, though to her, at that time, it had no meaning at all. He was delighted. It seemed to open up a recess in his mind that he

had never previously had the courage to show. He quoted Maynard on a variety of subjects, always with the air of one stating a dogmatic truth. On these occasions all scepticism dropped away from him, as if in a dangerous and perplexing world he had found at last one object of belief. It was absurd, but there was at the same time something touching in the naïveté of his admiration. If Margaret were to suggest that Maynard might be wrong, he was astonished and wounded. Had she not read the book and admired it? This was a confirmation of his view that when she disagreed with him, she did so out of sheer perversity. She gave way, anxious not to lose one of the few positions where they could meet and talk in sympathy.

She was now, after eight years of marriage, reconciled to a certain static type of relationship with Stuart. She had not yet gone so far as to see her whole life as a failure, and often consoled herself by seeing her present situation as a temporary one, a period spent in the wilderness. In the meantime she directed her energies towards making her exile as comfortable as possible.

She found it easier than she had thought. It seemed to her, as she surveyed the problem, that the most testing feature of marriage was the fact of being, as it were, identified with another person, a state of affairs which became either incredibly exciting or quite catastrophic, according to the suitability of the match. One moved through life like one of a pair of Siamese twins, bartering a single personality for a share in a dual one. She set herself to break this link, to see Stuart as a cultivated, generous, though not particularly admirable person, who shared the same house with her. Taken from this point of view, he could have been a great deal worse. He was content to spend much of his time alone with his books and his music. Money disposed of many of the circumstances which might have drawn them into an intimate relationship against their will.

Stuart was ready to meet her more than half-way—he too had no desire for an atmosphere of strain. The tone of their

conversation changed. They became polite and considerate. They refrained from personal criticism and argued only about general matters. Margaret studied his tastes and tried to keep him in a good humour. When he did something foolish, she worked hard to persuade herself that it was entirely his own affair and nothing whatever to do with her. She noticed that he too was exhibiting an equal tolerance. Without a word being said, spheres of influence had been demarcated, a balance of power had been struck. They lived on terms of formal, highly concentrated cordiality.

At first Margaret was inclined to treat Stuart's attachment to Maynard as nothing more than a fad. He was prone to such transient enthusiasms. When she saw that there was a more permanent basis to it, she tried to find out more about Maynard, but found, to her surprise, that, while eager to discuss his opinions, Stuart was reticent about the man himself. It was as if he regarded Maynard as his own property, and was unwilling to share his personal intimacy with anyone. When she suggested inviting him to dinner Stuart decided against it.

"Maynard doesn't like to get involved socially," he said. "He believes it hinders his work."

She did not press the point. She had no real interest in Maynard and had only proposed the invitation in the belief that it might please her husband.

In such precarious equilibrium as this they had existed, tolerably enough, for eight years. It was necessarily an arrangement that could only work so long as no major crises occurred. The balance between Margaret's inherent instinct to rebel and her determination to make the best of a bad job had not been easily achieved, and it was always possible that some outside force might upset it, with disastrous consequences. The force was, in the end, provided by her brother Michael.

## CHAPTER IV

FROM HIS EARLIEST YOUTH, Michael Hasleton had been recognised by all who had dealings with him as something of a problem. Margaret had memories of him as a child, showing even then an independence of judgment, a determination to manage things in his own way, which was almost indecently precocious. As a schoolboy, when his contemporaries were without exception grubby, awkward, and highly impressionable, he was neat, fastidious, withdrawn. He seemed immune to any of the ordinary influences which could be brought to bear on him.

It was not that he was openly rebellious—that might have been easier to deal with. But, when receiving reproof, or instruction, he had a way of looking at his elders through his horn-rimmed spectacles in an enigmatic, owlsh way, which suggested a combination of short sight and dumb insolence. He gave the impression that he was quite prepared to listen to what they had to say but reserved the right to draw his own conclusions. He was deceptively reasonable, and it was easy for an unperceptive person to believe that he had been convinced. But in the end he invariably did as he pleased.

He had not done well at school. As one of his masters had confided to Mr. Hasleton, "He doesn't seem to fit into the system." He had said this unhappily, as if Michael had caused him to have misgivings about the system, rather than the other way round. He felt sure that Michael was intelligent, though his results were poor. There was something about him which impressed. "Perhaps later on," said the master, "when he has more freedom. . . . I shouldn't be surprised if he really finds himself when he gets to Oxford."

"He won't go to Oxford," said Mr. Hasleton grimly, "unless he gets a scholarship. I can't afford to help him if he won't help himself."

Michael did not get a scholarship. Nor had he any clear idea about what he wanted to do on leaving school. He

finally agreed to a suggestion that he should study medicine at Manchester University.

Up to this point the Hasletons were still working on the assumption that they understood their son. Mr. Hasleton said he was lazy, Mrs Hasleton said he was 'reserved', but these were fairly common characteristics of which they had had previous experience. What they never suspected was that behind Michael's reserve was an utterly alien being, governed by a code of behaviour which he had worked out for himself, and which bore no relation whatever to the one his parents had so laboriously taught him.

For three months Michael appeared to be settling down well. He caught the eight-thirty train to Manchester each morning and returned home at night. Over dinner he would give an entertaining account of his day's experiences, describing the eccentricities of his lecturers and imitating their voices. Mrs. Hasleton was triumphant. She was a vague, untidy, kindly woman and had always held to the belief that Michael was misunderstood.

Margaret remembered very well the day when the news broke. It was some years before she was married, and she came home from the library to find her mother in tears and her father in a towering rage. Between gulps, her mother explained the cause of the commotion. That afternoon she had received a telephone call from the secretary to the Dean of the Medical School. She had asked, politely enough, if Mr. Michael Hasleton was perhaps ill. Her office had no record of his attendance at lectures since the beginning of the session.

Michael's reaction, when taxed with this, was if anything more disturbing than the discovery itself. He showed no sign of remorse. His main emotion seemed to be indignation at the duplicity of the Dean's secretary.

"The stupid girl," he said. "I told her not to do anything like that without consulting me. I knew it would upset you." He might have been shielding a dissolute younger brother. "She's exaggerating, of course, as such people so love to do.



I have been to a few lectures, but I soon found out it was a waste of time. I should never be any good in medicine."

"But why didn't you tell us?—Instead of coming home and pouring out a pack of lies——"

He nodded understandingly. "Yes, I can see how you feel about that. I can only say I'm sincerely sorry. If that fool of a woman had done as I told her, this need never have happened. I was only trying to save you from worry." Seeing the expression on his father's face, he went on rapidly, "All right, you may laugh—" Mr. Hasleton had never shown the slightest sign of laughing—"but that's exactly what I was trying to do. When I realised I couldn't go on, I started looking for a job. I knew you'd be upset when I gave up medicine, so I thought I'd get the job first, to soften the blow, as it were. As for the lectures, there wasn't much point in attending once I'd decided to chuck up the whole course."

"And it didn't occur to you," said Mr. Hasleton, "that you were being in any way dishonest in all this?"

"Financially, do you mean? I don't think so. At the beginning I genuinely intended to go through with it. And after that—well, you'd paid in advance, hadn't you? They wouldn't have given you your money back, you know."

"I didn't mean that. I meant in lying to us—every day, every night—going solemnly up to your bedroom to study——"

"Really, father, this is too bad. I've already explained that I did it with the very best intentions." He added, in an aggrieved tone, "This is what comes of trying to spare people's feelings. I shall know better another time."

Mrs. Hasleton never really got over this blow to her hopes. With surprising insight, she picked on the one most disconcerting feature of the whole episode. "I could have forgiven him most things," she said to Margaret afterwards, "but, do you know, I can't get it out of my mind that he actually enjoyed deceiving us."

He had many jobs after that. He tried business, insurance, journalism—it was always the same story. He made an excel-

lent first impression, and people who were ignorant of his reputation were ready, even sometimes eager, to employ him. They started by thinking of him as a very promising young man. This stage was succeeded by another, in which they thought of him as an eccentric, perhaps even a little unstable, but nevertheless showing flashes of brilliance which made him worth retaining. Such tolerance stimulated him to further outrages, as if to see how much they would stand. Finally, weary of waiting for his promise to materialise, they would, with a degree of emphasis which varied with circumstances, recommend him to try some other occupation. He was usually prepared to agree with them.

"Let's face it," he would say. (He prided himself on his readiness to face facts.) "Let's face it—I haven't found my niche."

Curiously, it was in this time of failure, a failure entirely of his own creation, that Margaret became drawn to Michael as never before. The years in age which lay between them became less of a barrier as they grew older. When he found that she was not shocked by his behaviour, and had no intention of trying to reform him, he began to confide in her. He loved to talk, and took pleasure in retailing to her the most scandalous details of his life and love affairs. She began to have some sort of understanding of his behaviour. It was easy to dismiss him as a waster, but on closer knowledge it was apparent that this was a gross over-simplification. There was no weakness about him. He could stand out against the pressure of society and the ties of loyalty and affection in a way that aroused her admiration. Nor was he lazy, in the ordinary sense of the word. He was extremely alert. He could concentrate his mind effectively on a problem so long as it interested him, but there were few problems which interested him for long. His life was a series of experiments. He would enter each experience with enthusiastic curiosity, extract from it whatever was important to him, and then toss it aside.

"For a person like myself," he explained, "it's not enough

merely to keep alive. I have to have something which excites me. I can't spend my life grappling with tedious details."

"There are tedious details in every job," she said.

"So I've found. But to the people who are really fitted for the job, the details matter. However tiresome, they have to be dealt with. There's a certain obsessional character about success."

"You've never felt that?"

"Not yet. But the time will come. I shall keep on trying till I find something."

His faith in himself was so strong that she was always half-convinced by it. There was something remarkable about a man who could discount such a series of setbacks and write them off to experience. She felt that it was a mistake to judge him by ordinary standards. And as time went on, she developed a fellow-feeling for him. Their situations had certain comparable features. She too hung on to a conviction that she was worth more than the world had so far given her.

For many years now Michael had been playing the same game with his parents as he had with his successive employers, gradually increasing the pressure on their patience until it became almost unendurable. Finally the breaking-point was reached, setting in motion a chain of circumstances which was to bring disaster, in one degree or another, to almost everyone connected with him—everyone, that is, except Michael himself. It was on a June evening, four days before her sudden collapse, that Margaret first heard of this final, decisive offence. She came home after a day's shopping to find a telephone message. Would she please go over to her parents' house immediately?

Her first thought was of Michael. The message was almost certainly connected with him. She would find herself, as always, trying to stand up for him, an advocate with an extremely shaky case. She felt herself unequal to the effort. Recently she had been tired, and on edge. She could not be

certain why, unless it was that she was now thirty-five and was beginning to feel the approach of middle age. Forty was the deadline, the age at which it was too late to make a new start. And at forty, unless something dramatic were to happen, where would she be? Just exactly where she was at present, carrying on in an existence which was meaningless to her simply because life had to be lived and there was nothing to be done about it. Unloving, unloved, with desires unsatisfied and ambitions frustrated, waiting for an opportunity that had already passed her by many years ago. Her life, she thought, was like an equation, conclusively, hopelessly balanced, except for one unknown quantity—Michael.

At home the scene was set for a family crisis. Her parents were ranged, one on either side of the fireplace, in the high-backed wing chairs which Mr. Hasleton insisted upon—all others, he contended, encouraged indolence and curvature of the spine. He himself always sat rigidly erect, and it was hard to imagine him in any more informal posture. He liked to think there was something ambassadorial about his appearance. He was tall and thin, and dressed always in dark, heavily-pressed suits, the trouser-legs just a little narrower than was fashionable. His thin white hair was so neatly plastered down on his scalp that it might almost have been painted there. When Margaret went into the room he was in a characteristic attitude, his elbows resting on the arms of his chair, his hands clasped in front of him, tapping his teeth nervously with his knuckles.

Mrs. Hasleton sat opposite him, her hair awry, her stockings twisted, her feet squirming restlessly in a pair of down-at-heel slippers. She was a chain-smoker and could never remember to use ashtrays. It was possible to chart her progress through the house by the droppings from her cigarettes on the carpets, occasionally even on dressing-tables, or in beds. In times of agitation her addiction to tobacco became uncontrollable. At this moment there was an unusually large pile of ash in her lap and another in the fireplace.

"Margaret," she said, jumping up, "thank goodness you've

come. Really, this is awful—we don't know what to do."

"I know perfectly well what to do," said Mr. Hasleton, "perfectly well. It's all quite clear to me."

"Naturally," broke in Mrs. Hasleton mournfully, "your father's very annoyed. You can't blame him."

Mr. Hasleton looked at his wife with distaste.

"Isabel, do you think I might ask you to let me speak for myself?"

Mrs. Hasleton showed no resentment. She looked at Margaret as if to say, 'You see how things are.'

Margaret said, "I don't know yet what it's all about."

"It's Michael. In the first place, he's left Brandon's."

"Is that all?"

Margaret was not surprised. She had never expected Michael to settle down as a traveller or a firm of soap-flake manufacturers. There had always been a strong suspicion in her mind that he had only taken the job as an excuse to go to London and get away from his family.

"No—unfortunately it isn't," said Mr. Hasleton. He opened the speech for the prosecution: "I won't say anything about Michael's behaviour in the past. As you know, I've been close to washing my hands of him time and time again. When I think of the anxiety he's caused your mother. . . . But up to now he's never done anything openly dishonest. Not that I'm surprised—I always said it was bound to end up that way."

"Dishonest?"

"There's no other word for it. He's swindled me out of five hundred pounds."

Margaret was aghast. "How on earth did he get you to trust him with five hundred pounds?"

"I didn't—do you think I'm a fool!" His voice was hoarse with indignation. "He sold the car."

This was really serious. When Michael had joined Brandon's they had made it a condition that he should have a car. After a great deal of argument, and repeated assurances that he would look after it, Mr. Hasleton had bought him a second-

hand Austin. Margaret had been prepared to hear that he had wrecked it, or been found drunk in charge. But to have sold it and pocketed the proceeds. . . .

"That's going a bit far," she said.

"In my opinion, that's a gross understatement. It's a criminal action—a felony, I should imagine. Obtaining money under false pretences. He could be gaoled for it."

"What has he done with the money?"

"God knows. But one thing I'm prepared to bet on—we shall never see it again. He sold the car several months ago. I only discovered it by accident. I happened to run into one of the directors of Brandon's at the club."

"Have you spoken to Michael?"

"I've tried to. I rang him up that very night. But he's left his lodgings. There was a forwarding address—care of a solicitor in Temple Bar. I wrote to him, and this—" he picked up a letter from the table by his side and almost threw it at her "*—this is what I received in reply.*"

The letter was from Hart and Trubshaw, Solicitors, Temple Bar, London. It ran:

DEAR SIR,

I am instructed by my client, Mr. Michael Hasleton, to reply to certain accusations which you made in a letter to him dated 27th May. He states that he very much regrets having to take this course, but the seriousness of your allegations leaves him no alternative.

In your letter it is alleged that a certain motor vehicle was loaned by you to my client and has since been sold, the money from this sale being fraudulently converted to his own use. My client wishes to make it clear that he does not accept this as in any way a true statement of the facts. He assumes that the motor vehicle in question is an Austin Sixteen saloon number FXY 482. This, he states, was a gift made by you to him in January of this year and was consequently his own property to dispose of as he wished.

My client desires me to warn you of the dangers of

making defamatory statements of this kind, and reserves the right to take appropriate action to defend his good name.

Yours faithfully,

A. V. HART.

"Well," said Mr. Hasleton, "what do you think of that?"

"I suppose," Margaret suggested feebly, "it might be a joke."

"A joke!"

"He always had a distorted sense of humour."

"I'm not interested in his sense of humour. I've finished with him. Nobody can say I haven't given him every possible chance. I have my own health and my own pocket to consider. And," he said, as if feeling that such a strong line as this needed a more altruistic basis, "there's your mother. I'm not a rich man, and when I die she'll have to live on what I leave her. What with death duties and this damnable taxation, it won't be very much. It's not fair to her to be handing out hundreds of pounds to a young good-for-nothing who ought to be earning his own living."

"What I can't understand," said Mrs. Hasleton, "is why he got this awful solicitor to reply for him." She added plaintively, "And it's all so untrue."

Margaret handed back the letter to her father. "There's nothing much to be said, is there? On the face of it, he's behaving abominably."

"You've usually gone to great lengths to defend him in the past," said Mr. Hasleton, who appeared to be spoiling for a fight. "I was interested to know what you'd say."

With an effort, Margaret managed to ignore the provocation. "What are you going to do about this letter?" she asked.

"Nothing. I can't very well bring an action against him."

"Would you like me to go up to London and have a talk with him?"

"Oh, Margaret," said Mrs. Hasleton, "I wish you would."

"If I do, I want to know what to say. What can I tell him from you?"

"Tell him your father's very, very angry——"

Mr. Hasleton's eyes bulged. "You'll tell him nothing of the sort! I want it made clear that I'll have nothing further to do with him. I'm adamant."

"Not even if he returns the five hundred pounds?"

"I don't give a damn about the five hundred pounds!"

When Margaret got home, her head was aching and she had no appetite for dinner. The news about Michael had upset her more than she had shown. She could not escape an illogical feeling that her father was right in treating her almost as an accessory; as if her sympathy with Michael in the past made her partially responsible for what had occurred. She felt bound to her brother far more closely than she had ever been to her husband.

After dinner she said to Stuart, "I shall have to go to London for a few days."

He nodded indulgently. "Buying some clothes?"

"No. It's about Michael. He's in trouble."

"Again?"

"Yes."

"What is it this time?"

"The usual sort of thing," she said vaguely. She had decided to tell Stuart nothing about the car and the solicitor's letter. "He's given up his job and moved to another address. It's all rather involved."

"I see. What do your parents think about it?"

"You can imagine. My father says he won't have anything further to do with him."

"He has my sympathy. I suppose it's one of the few topics on which your father and I are in agreement."

"I don't know why you're so intolerant about Michael." She tried to flatter him. "You're usually so broadminded."

"You miss the point. I'm not indulging in moral censure. But I find a certain level of conduct desirable in the people I associate with, if only as a matter of convenience. Michael wants everything on his own terms. You can hardly blame me if I find them unacceptable."



"There's more to it than that. You obviously dislike him."

"That's a typically feminine interpretation. You find it impossible to think of anything except in terms of emotion. My attitude towards Michael is one of indifference. I've tried to be friendly towards him because he was your brother. On one or two occasions I gave him useful advice, and he simply laughed. When people won't come half-way to meet me, that's the end as far as I'm concerned. I don't dislike them. I just cut them completely out of my life."

"You make it all sound so simple."

"If you don't view things emotionally, they are simple."

He returned to his book, but Margaret had the feeling that he was not really reading it. After a few moments he dropped it on to his knees and said, almost to himself, "He laughed in my face. I shan't forget that."

## CHAPTER V

MARGARET FOUND HART AND TRUBSHAW on the top floor of a dilapidated building just south of the Strand. Their offices were at the end of a long dingy corridor behind a frosted glass partition. It did not give the impression of being a very flourishing partnership. There was, on closer inspection, only one office, protected from casual callers by a small ante-room, in which a girl sat typing.

"I'd like to see Mr. Hart," said Margaret.

"Just a moment." The girl picked up a telephone. "There's a lady to see you, Mr. Hart," she said into the receiver. She turned to Margaret. "What is your name, please?"

"Cardwell, Mrs. Cardwell."

The girl repeated it into the telephone. She listened for a moment and then said, "Very well, Mr. Hart," and put down the instrument.

"Could you wait a moment, please?"

"Is Mr. Hart engaged?"

The girl looked at her uncertainly. "Well—yes. He's——" She seemed to make up her mind. "Yes, he is."

Margaret was tired and impatient. The girl, she decided, was obviously lying. To be kept waiting unnecessarily in such squalid surroundings as these was more than she could stand. She walked straight through into the inner office.

Mr. Hart was an undersized young man of about thirty, with a hook nose and prominent ears. When Margaret entered, he was in the process of hurriedly putting something away in a filing cabinet. She noticed a damp, circular stain on the top of his desk.

"Hey!" he cried indignantly, "I told Valerie——"

"Yes, I know. I heard you. But I'm in a hurry." She looked meaningly at the desk. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything important."

He laughed, with an ineffective assumption of nonchalance. "No—not really. What was it that you wanted?"

"I came to see you about Michael Hasleton."

"Oh." He became wary. "And what exactly did you want to know?"

"I'm his sister."

"His sister!" His face lit up with sudden interest. "Not the one who married the millionaire?"

"I'm his only sister. But I can assure you my husband isn't a millionaire."

He waved this aside. "All right—we won't quibble. What is he worth—half a million, a quarter of a million? It's all the same to me. The salient point is—he's rich, he's a capitalist. Am I right?"

"Mr. Hart——"

He held up a grubby hand. "No—please! Don't be annoyed! There's no need to be on the defensive. Don't get the idea that I resent your being rich. By no means. I respect you for it. In my profession we have a suitable reverence for wealth. Come, have a seat. Have a drink." He produced a bottle of gin from the filing cabinet. "I'll have one with you if you like."

"It seems to me you've had enough already."

"And what of it?" he said defensively. "Is my speech slurred? Is my mind any the less acute? Why——"

"Mr. Hart, do you mind if we get down to business? I presume it was you who wrote this letter to my father."

He scrutinised the letter and handed it back. The note of caution returned to his voice. "Quite right," he said.

"If it's meant as a joke, I think it's a particularly heartless one."

"A joke!" He spoke like a man whose professional pride has been wounded. "That's a formal solicitor's letter. My client instructs me, and I act for him. I can't afford to do that sort of thing as a joke."

"Did my brother pay you for it?"

"Now there," he said bitterly, "you touch on a sore point. He didn't. And I'll tell you here and now, I feel very badly about it. I treated your brother as a friend. I offered to do this job for him—a man who owes me money, mind you—at cut rates. I could get into trouble for that. And I've never had so much as the price of a drink out of it. People don't realise——" He waved his hand in a gesture which took in the filing cabinet, the desk, even the anaemic Valerie, typing listlessly, on the other side of the door. "I've got overheads. I started here from nothing—on my own—nobody to help me——"

"What about Trubshaw?"

"A myth," he said grandly, "a man of less than straw. But it looks better on the notepaper. As you see, I'm a person of initiative. And I look after my client's interests. If you come to me for advice——"

"The only advice I want from you is how to find my brother."

"Yes—quite so." He sucked his teeth meditatively. "May I ask with what object?"

"Is it any business of yours?"

"In one way—no. But," he added craftily, "in another way

it is. Business is the interchange of commodities, and the commodity in question here is information. Besides which, I have my reputation to consider. I can't tell you anything which might be damaging to my client."

Margaret struggled to keep her temper. This was like taking part in some obscure guessing game. "Don't be ridiculous! How could it be damaging for me to know his address?"

"That depends on your object in finding him. You might be wanting to serve a writ——"

"All I want to do is to talk to him. I want to persuade him to act sensibly and stop baiting my father."

He became benevolent. "Ah, now I see—I grasp your position. You've been sent down as an emissary of the family to find the prodigal son, rescue him from bad company——" his eyes glittered hopefully "——pay his debts——"

"I may as well make it clear," said Margaret, "that I have no intention whatever of paying you any money."

"Not even to save his good name?"

"No."

"Oh well——" He accepted the disappointment philosophically. "So you're going to try to reform him?"

"I wouldn't exactly say that."

"Yes you are. I can tell by the look in your eye. But, take it from me, you've got a job on. He's got a nasty mean streak in him, that boy. He's clever, I grant you——" He pondered for a moment on old grievances. "Clever—but mean."

"Will you give me the address now?"

"All right." He took a piece of scrap paper from the desk-drawer, scribbled on it, and handed it to her. It read, 'Hotel Rossignol, Avenue de la Gare, Le Touquet.'

She looked up in surprise. "But I never realised——"

"No. I thought you mightn't have. He went abroad a couple of weeks ago. Said he needed a holiday." He added cryptically, "Perhaps he did, at that."

"How long did he go for?"

"Don't ask me, Mrs. Cardwell. I'm not in his confidence to that extent."

She thought for a moment and then decided. "I'm going over to see him. I can get a plane tomorrow."

"As you please." She got up to go.

Without much conviction he said, "I suppose I ought to ask you for a fee for this."

"You'd be wasting your breath."

"I expect so." As he showed her out, he said, "This is a hard world, Mrs. Cardwell. I set out with great ideals—I was going to rob the rich. But the rich are difficult to rob." He sighed regretfully. "One has to take it out of the poor in the end."

## CHAPTER VI

THE HOTEL ROSSIGNOL WAS A NARROW, dejected-looking building, flanked on either side by the two limbs of a glossy multiple store. The exterior was in bad repair, as if the management, realising that the inevitable expansion of a voracious neighbour would shortly engulf it, had not considered any expenditure worth while. Inside, it was hardly any better. The hotel had never, even in its best days, made pretensions to luxury. On the one occasion, long ago, when it had managed to insert itself for one short year into the Michelin Guide, it had been accompanied by a hieroglyphic which described it as exhibiting 'some degree of comfort'. The Guide had been generous. As Margaret surveyed the dingy public rooms, the high, lightless hall floored in brown linoleum, the offices of Hart and Trubshaw seemed almost gay by comparison. This impression of cheerlessness was accentuated by a series of notices, prominently displayed, which publicly proclaimed the lack of confidence of the management in its guests. They were exhorted, in aggressive terms, to take care of their valuables, to be economical with

electric light, and to refrain from causing disturbances in the small hours of the morning. The Rossignol, it was plain, was a hotel on the defensive.

Michael's room was on the third floor. After a sharp argument with the desk-clerk, who insisted, for no very clear reason, on the production of her passport, Margaret made her way up to it. It was at the end of a long corridor pervaded by the smell of mice.

"Why—— Margaret!"

Michael was in his shirtsleeves, but had lost none of his customary elegance. He came forward to meet her with a smile of genuine pleasure.

"You look very well," she said awkwardly.

"I *am* very well, though, as you see, in reduced circumstances."

He waved an apologetic hand at the room. It was small and inadequately lighted. It contained a plain deal bedroom wardrobe, a writing table with a rickety chair, and a washstand on which rested a chipped basin half-full of dirty water. There was a tin *bidet* resting on a low trestle in one corner. The carpet was threadbare, and the wallpaper, of a crude flowered pattern much favoured by cheap French hotels, had peeled in many places—here and there it was additionally defaced, by telephone numbers and pornographic pencil drawings. The room was dominated by a large double bed.

"I believe it's what's known technically as a 'house of call'," he explained. He pointed to a card behind the door listing the official scale of charges—*à la semaine—au jour—à l'heure*. "But it does for me. I've never been dependent on luxury."

Margaret sat down on the bed, raising a small cloud of dust from the eiderdown.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

He seemed doubtful as to whether to answer the question or evade it. He decided to evade it.

"I might ask you the same question."

"I wanted to see you."

"Because of father?"

"Yes."

He smiled again. There was nothing forced about his ease of manner. He acted, as always, like a man in an impregnable position. She knew from experience how difficult it was to put him in the wrong. She resolved to attack him at the one point where, so far as she could see, no defence was possible.

"Michael, why did you send that letter?"

He nodded his head approvingly. "How like you to go straight to the root of the matter. Anyone else might have started at the beginning and asked me why I left Brandon's."

"I don't care about Brandon's."

"No. It was a silly idea from the start. And the car—well, I was short of money. I couldn't bear the thought of going back home. It was an impossible position." He paused for a moment, as if searching his conscience. "But perhaps the letter was rather a mistake."

"It was disgraceful."

"Yes, I suppose so." Having accepted the reproach, his mind turned elsewhere. "Tell me," he said curiously, "how did the old man take it?"

She was assailed by a feeling of helplessness, of being out of contact, so that words which meant one thing to her meant something quite different to him. He was treating the affair as if it were nothing more than a practical joke, of a somewhat radical kind, but nevertheless amusing.

"He was bitterly hurt."

"But what did he say? How did he react?"

She told him in detail what her father had said. At the end, he said, "Thanks very much."

"You still haven't told me why you did it."

"No—As a matter of fact, it was Hart who put me up to it. I told him about Father accusing me of stealing the car, and he pointed out that no one could prove that it wasn't a gift. That being so, the statement was defamatory. There was a sort of logic about it that appealed to me. And Father's own letter was pretty offensive, you know. I couldn't help wanting to take him down a peg."

"I'm afraid it's the last time you'll do it."

"Yes—I expected that. Definitely washed up, you think?"

"He says even if you repay the five hundred pounds, he won't change his mind."

"That wouldn't make much difference. I haven't the remotest chance of repaying it, at any rate for the moment."

"Is it all gone?"

"Practically."

"What have you been doing for this last three months?"

"I've been trying to make a start on my own. You see—" He hesitated, as if anxious to give a completely accurate picture of his state of mind "—while I was working at Brandon's I did a lot of thinking about myself. It was obvious I wasn't going to be any good there. I'd got away from home; that was a good thing, but it wasn't enough. I came to the conclusion that the reason for my false starts was that I was still tied too much to my parents. I've done too many things because they wanted it. And they've no idea what's best for me at all—I'm not the sort of person they understand. I thought if I could cut myself completely off, I might have a chance. On the other hand, I hadn't any money. Selling the car came to me as a brilliant idea. I could kill two birds with one stone. And there was something dramatic and decisive about it which appealed to me."

It was curious, she thought, how he could transform the most discreditable actions, in the light of his own terms, so that they seemed, for the moment, no longer shabby, cruel tricks, but positively courageous. Another person, one with a strong moral sense and confident of an ability to judge right from wrong in all circumstances, might have regarded his explanation as the addition of insult to injury. But for Margaret it was impossible not to sympathise with his point of view. Wrapped as she was in a suffocating mist of ideas and conventions which had no meaning for her, she was prepared to accept his contention that for the purposes of self-fulfilment almost any means were justified. To sacrifice



one's own liberty out of consideration for others was to commit suicide.

She envied him his ruthlessness, but at the same time it disturbed her. In pursuit of an object, a worth-while object, it had a sort of grandeur. But supposing it existed of itself, a desire for cruelty for cruelty's sake? She could not know, and he gave her no help. He demanded, simply, that she should believe in him.

His first efforts on his own had been unsuccessful. He had tried various jobs for short periods. He had even gone on the stage.

"A friend of mine wangled me a minor part in one of those suburban theatres. It was a rotten play and folded up within a fortnight. But I learnt quite a bit. One of these days I might try my hand at writing something. The manager offered to read anything I sent him."

"Why don't you?"

"So far I've been too busy." He began to describe certain abortive excursions into commerce, characterised more by ingenuity than a solid grasp of essential problems. In association with Hart, he had speculated in the property market.

"We had bad luck," he said. "Values fell and we had to sell at a loss. We were both pretty well cleaned out."

"He says you owe him money."

"I shouldn't take any notice of that. He's a bit of a shark, I'm afraid. I hope he didn't get anything out of you."

"No."

"Good. So there I was, nearly flat broke. And I'd been living fairly extravagantly, because we were doing well until then. I've never been very good at petty economies. It was a nasty surprise when I found I'd only a few pounds left."

"What happened then?"

"I was determined not to ask for help from home. And, after the first shock, there was something quite exciting about it—being absolutely at rock bottom. And almost straight away I hit on a scheme for making money. I used to get up early and go to Covent Garden, buying fruit and vegetables

on the cheap. Then in the afternoon I used to go round the pubs and sell them. I built up quite a connection."

"I can't see much future in that," said Margaret dubiously.

"Nor could I. That's why I packed it in. I made nearly fifty quid, all told. But to make anything out of business in times like these, you need capital. A hundred or two isn't enough. I've come to the conclusion that you need at least a thousand pounds."

There was an aggrieved note in his voice. It was as if, for the first time, he was beginning to doubt, not his ability, but his chances of making it felt against the pressure of circumstances. Before, he had never made excuses. He was prepared to discard an unsatisfactory hypothesis without regret, in his eagerness to try out a new one. Now that he was alone, was his confidence beginning to disintegrate? She knew a momentary sense of panic at the thought. She realised now how deeply her own hopes were bound up with his. He was so much stronger than she, his chances were so much better—if he could not break out of his prison, what chance was there for her?

She had no choice but to support him. He was like a bank to which she had entrusted the treasure of her hopes. She was committed, fully and irrevocably. It was too late to retreat, to cut her losses. If she presented her bill now, he could not pay, even in promises. She would bankrupt herself and him.

She sat on the bed, dust pricking her eyelids, her mouth parched with the taste of stale smoke. She said, "A thousand pounds? It's a great deal of money."

"Surely not to you?"

"I have hardly any money myself."

"No, but Stuart— That's the absurd part. It would be nothing to him."

"You could ask him to lend it to you, I suppose."

"Do you think he would?"

"I'm afraid not."

"No, of course he wouldn't. He doesn't like me. It's maddening. Stuart ought not to be rich at all. He'd be

perfectly happy as the curator of a museum, or delivering arty little talks on Schönberg for the B.B.C."

There was a silence. Through the flimsy wall they could hear movements in the next room, voices talking rapidly in French, a shrill feminine giggle, the creaking of springs. Two shoes dropped noisily on to the floor.

"You still haven't told me why you're here."

"To make some money. A few weeks ago I met a Jew in a club in London—he'd just won two thousand at the Casino on a system. He wasn't pulling my leg—I confirmed it from other sources. In the end I got the system out of him——"

"For how much?"

"For nothing. I tell you, he's not a swindler. He's a smart chap. He runs a poker club in Maida Vale. He's what Hart calls 'a man of substance'." Seeing the scepticism written on her face, he went on earnestly, "Look—I know what you're thinking, but put yourself in my position. Fifty pounds isn't any use to me at all. If I can run it up into something, it might be. Probably the system needs a bit of luck too, most systems do, but—who knows?—I might be lucky."

"And supposing you're not?"

"I'll think of something else."

She shook her head miserably. "I don't like it."

Up to this moment he had spoken to her as an ally. Now a certain coldness came into his manner. "You don't *have* to like it, you know," he said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interfere."

"It's all right. I just had a momentary impression that you were going to speak to me for my own good."

"No, it wasn't that." Yet in her heart she knew that it *was* that. She could not let him run on towards disaster without at least making an effort to help. It was no use merely disapproving. If she could offer some alternative. . . .

"It was just—I came here to make a suggestion. Why don't you come home and live with us?"

As soon as she had said it, she was appalled at the thought

of the complications that might ensue. But she knew, too, that it was the one thing she most desired.

"It wouldn't be the same as being with Mother and Father," she almost pleaded. "Nobody would interfere with you."

He smiled. It was a curious smile, as if he had some inner joke which amused him. "Does Stuart know of this?"

"Never mind about Stuart. Will you come?"

"No. Thanks very much all the same." He looked at his watch. "We ought to be going soon. We can have dinner and then go along to the tables."

"Have you tried the system out yet?"

"Not seriously. I've been once or twice and just observed the run of the table. I think it's going to work all right. The difficulty is in sticking out a losing sequence. I really need more money than I've got." He looked at her speculatively. "You haven't any loose money, have you?"

Her hands trembled in her lap. It was like a seduction, the forcing on her of a complicity she desired and yet feared. She must give way, she knew. Yet she would have liked it to have been a more gradual, a more planned surrender.

She got up from the bed and went towards the window. She tried to open it, but the catch was broken. The room was too small. Emotions were like sound, varying in intensity with the square of the distance.

"Now I know why people commit suicide," she said. "If I had to live with Stuart in a room like this. . . ."

"Let's face it," he said, "Stuart's a wash-out. I never liked him."

"But you wouldn't mind taking his money?"

He looked surprised. "Good heavens, no! Why should I? Really, Margaret, I'm beginning to wonder what's come over you."

"How much do you want?"

"Whatever you can spare. I don't know——"

She came back from the window. There was no object in delaying any longer. "I can let you have a hundred."

"A hundred! That's magnificent—it really gives the system

a chance. I'll explain the details to you over dinner." His eyes were sparkling and his voice radiant with optimism. He looked absurdly young for his twenty-seven years. He looked around at the wallpaper, the *bidet*, bedside lamp with the torn plastic shade, as if surveying them for the first time, without malice. "With any sort of luck I shall be out of this place tomorrow."

## CHAPTER VII

"LONESOME?"

"Not particularly."

"Not particularly." The American repeated the phrase with relish, as if she had said something very witty. "You're British, aren't you?"

"Yes."

He gave a tipsy chuckle and climbed down from his high stool by the Casino bar. The two of them were almost alone there. Through the doorway Margaret could hear the hum of voices, the monotonous calling of the croupiers, the sound of rakes moving the chips about the tables. The American picked up his glass of whisky and moved towards her with clumsy deliberation.

"Mind if I join you?"

Margaret regarded him without enthusiasm. He was fair-haired and portly, approaching middle age. His crumpled seersucker suit, like most American clothes, looked as if it had been made for a much taller man and then cut down. The long jacket, with heavily-padded shoulders, accentuated his bulky chest and hips, and made his legs, already too short, appear even more out of proportion to his body. He was drunk, but, she estimated, manageably so. She gave way to a fear of being thought stand-offish.

"Not a bit. Come and sit down."

"Much obliged. Nice to meet somebody who speaks

English. I reckon you thought I was fresh, didn't you?" As she made as if to protest, he waved her into silence. "No, it's all right, I understand. You don't do that sort of thing in England. But here it's different. I thought I'd go nuts if I didn't speak to somebody."

"You're here alone?"

"Yes. Are you?"

"No. My brother's with me. He's in the other room, trying to make a fortune at roulette. Not very successfully, I'm afraid."

"Too bad," he said sympathetically. His eyes flickered towards her left hand. "Husband here too?"

"No. I've left him at home."

"Like me. My wife's back in the United States." He took a gulp at his whisky. "She's probably divorcing me at this very minute."

"I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry. We never hit it off. My fault, I'm afraid. As for her, she's as good as hers." He said, with apparent irrelevance, "Must go. His high school in Cleveland, Ohio?"

"I've been lost a lot. I've got the high school thriving town. Industrial, you know—steel mills, bridges. I've lived there all my life."

"It sounds very much like the town I live in." "Then maybe you know what it's like. Those sort of places are pretty much the same anywhere. Life's comfortable—you make money—when you come down to it, there doesn't seem to be a damn thing to complain about. For a lot of people, there isn't. My wife always thought there was nowhere like Cleveland. Me," he said bitterly, "I hated it. It took me twenty years to find out how much." He suddenly became conscious of a lack of hospitality. "I'm sorry—what are you drinking?"

"Nothing more, thank you."

"Scotch? Dry Martini?"

"Nothing."

He shouted to the waiter. "A double Scotch, Charlie, and a dry Martini for the lady."

He said, "All my life I wanted to go to Europe. Not just to look around—I don't give a hoot about art treasures and cathedrals. I wanted to *feel* something—I didn't even know what it was. You couldn't expect my wife to understand. She didn't mind the idea of a trip, but when I said I was going to sell out of the business, she thought I was crazy. She did everything she could to stop me but I knew that it was something I had to do. In the end she threatened to divorce me, so I said, 'Go ahead,' Then I sold up and left."

"How long have you been over here?"

"A couple of months." He sighed. "As you may have guessed, it's no good. I just can't see anywhere to fit in. It's there—the thing that I wanted—I know that. But somehow I can't get near to it. There's a sort of skin of Cleveland about me that keeps anything else out. Maybe I'm too old." He asked miserably, "You think I'm too old?"

"I don't know how old you are."

"Forty-five."

He was right, she thought. He *was* too old. His body had lost the spring of youth, his shoulders were hunched, his pale, faintly bloodshot eyes were frightened. He had lost, not the capacity to suffer, but the capacity to gain by suffering.

"It's not your age. It's how you feel," she said evasively.

He stared for a moment at his glass of whisky, and then drained it. "I feel old" he said.

There was an embarrassing silence. Margaret began to wish that Michael would return. At any moment the American was liable to burst into tears. His story was pathetic but his alcoholic self-pity made it also somewhat ridiculous. There were signs that he himself was beginning to realise the necessity of pulling himself together. He was looking up with frowning concentration at a lamp on the wall, as if it was a trick he used for focusing his eyes. The trick seemed to work. When he spoke again, it was not as a disillusioned romantic but as a man of the world.

"I shouldn't talk so much about myself," he said. "I must apologise."

"It's quite all right."

"In a way you must blame yourself for being such a sympathetic person. That's not just an idle compliment—I really mean it. You're the first woman I've met in months that I could really talk to." A distinctly amorous note had crept into his voice. He gave the impression that, in a fuddled way, he was trying to work out possibilities.

"This guy in the other room," he said, "the one you call your brother——"

"He is my brother."

"On the level? You don't have to worry, you know. I'm broadminded."

Margaret rose from the seat. "Really Mr. —— I'm afraid I don't know your name ——"

"Now please don't take offence——" he said in alarm.

"I think I'll go and watch the play."

"Mind if I come along?" Without waiting for a reply, he attached himself to her. "Though there's nothing much to watch. I was sitting in at the baccarat table earlier on but I threw it up. You mention anything above a thousand dollars and they get scared. Why, at Las Vegas I've seen ten thousand on the table——"

"I've never played baccarat," said Margaret. She was repelled by these childish efforts to impress her. On the whole he had been better in his previous state.

"It's easy. Watch."

He lurched over to the table. Eight preoccupied Frenchmen were seated around it, their hands on the baize cloth, their faces deliberately inexpressive. They might have been taking part in a religious ceremony. The cards flashed out, the money changed hands, with confusing speed. The croupier gabbled the ritual phrases punctiliously but without any real sign of interest, like a tired priest performing a funeral in the rain.

The American leaned across, his cigarette perilously close to the bald head of one of the players. There were a few hostile glances.



He called, "*Banco.*"

After a moment's hesitation, the croupier dealt him a card, then another. It was all over very quickly. The croupier pushed across a pile of rectangular chips with a few oval ones on top.

"*Cent mille francs,*" he said.

The American threw the oval ones back and picked up the rest. As he walked away he rattled them contemptuously in his fingers like castanets.

"See what I mean?" he said. "Toffee papers."

Margaret looked over to the hundred-franc table, where Michael was sitting. The pile of chips in front of him was ominously small. As the wheel spun, he picked them up, very deliberately, and placed them on Black. A voice chanted, "*Trente-six, rouge, pair et passe!*" and Michael got up from the table, his hands empty. It came to Margaret, with surprise, how much she had hoped he would win. She had convinced herself repeatedly that he would not, the odds were against him, it was nothing but a wild and unlikely chance. But, behind that, hope had still existed. Now there was none. It was like opening the morning paper and seeing at last in print the announcement of the war one had known to be inevitable.

The American was still talking.

"Why don't you have a little fun? Take a throw at one of the tables. You don't have to worry about the money. Try your luck with one of these." He tried to force a ten-thousand-franc chip on her. "It's okay—no strings attached."

"No, thank you." She wanted to get rid of him before Michael came. "Why don't you play with it yourself?"

He shook his head. "It wouldn't give me a thing. This is just kid stuff——"

Michael edged his way through the crowd towards her.

"Ah, there you are. I've been looking for you."

In spite of his apparent composure, his face was white and there were tiny beads of perspiration on his brow. He eyed the American with disfavour.

"No good?" she said.

"No good." He said painfully, "Twelve reds in a row. Life's very strange."

"Were you on the colours?"

"Yes. I waited till five reds came up, then I thought it was bound to change. When it didn't, I began to double up. Mathematically——"

"Never double up," said the American paternally. "Take my advice and never do it. I remember a guy once——"

Michael said, "Who's the drunk?"

The American flushed. "Hey—listen here, young man——"

"Please," said Margaret, "do you mind—I'd like to talk to my brother alone."

The American hesitated, uncertain whether to take the matter further. Then he said, "Okay, if that's the way you want it——" He walked off, muttering to himself.

"Let's go into the bar," said Michael.

The bar was empty. Margaret watched him as he spoke to the barman, feeling a surge of pride in his grace and assurance. He had not the look of a beaten man. He wore his clothes well, and his thin, dark face had a responsible air. He looked like a young man prematurely distinguished, whom success had failed to spoil. She contrasted him with the American, now engaged, with the aid of his ten-thousand-franc chips, in making the acquaintance of a bored French girl with a sulky mouth. Was there no such thing as justice? Was the right to self-fulfilment entirely a question of chance?

Her mind rebelled against the idea. She did not know whether it was true or not, she only knew that it was intolerable. Life had to mean more than a spin of the wheel, a deal of the cards. It was better to believe that mistakes had been made—mistakes could be rectified. It was unthinkable that she and Michael should have carried within them the certainty of unhappiness, of failure, from the very date of birth; surely the injustice of creation could not go so far as that. No, somewhere an opportunity had been missed, a false step had been taken. There was still hope that a clue, to the enigma

might be found, but time was growing short. Hope was an exhausting emotion, which could not be prolonged for ever.

Michael sat down beside her. He seemed to be brooding over something. She waited for him to speak.

"Twelve of them—one after the other," he said. "It's hardly believable."

"It was rotten luck."

"I suppose the chances against it must be—let me see——" He made an abortive effort at calculation. "Well, millions anyway. I mean, if you were actually betting on it——"

"I'm sorry, Michael. I wish it had come off."

"I'm sorry too. And there was your hundred pounds into the bargain. . . ." His regret was perfunctory. He was more concerned with analysing his own sensations. "It has a curious effect, losing money like that. I felt as if in some way I'd been rejected. I suppose I'd always hoped in my heart that I was a lucky sort of person."

"Bad luck's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Neither is poverty—or physical deformity. The trouble is—it requires such an effort not to be ashamed of them. . . ." He twirled the stem of his glass, watching the sticky drops of vermouth falling slowly down the side. Margaret restrained herself from mentioning the problem which was uppermost in both their minds, the question of what was to be done next. If she made a false move now, she would alienate him completely. Finally he said, "This is rather where you came in, isn't it?"

He was now quite calm. The slight agitation which had caused him to be rude to the American was past. He was less concerned about the future than she was. She thought, not without a touch of bitterness, 'he is experienced in these situations'.

"You can't go back to living in that hotel."

"No," he conceded. "Not even if I wanted to. They have a strictly cash trade at the Rossignol."

"I'm thinking of myself. If you get to the end of your tether, you might do something silly. I should be worrying."

"I shan't commit suicide, if that's what's worrying you."

"I didn't mean that."

"Something illegal?"

She frowned, resenting his tactlessness. There was a limit to the possibilities one might discuss. "Searching for experience is all very well, but you have to stop somewhere."

"Yes, you're quite right. But I shouldn't worry too much. I can take better care of myself than everybody seems to think. However, there's no doubt that my present fortunes have undergone, not exactly a slump, but what the politicians would call a slight recession."

She said, almost timidly, "My offer's still open, you know."

"To come back with you?" He regarded her thoughtfully.

"Now, why are you so keen, I wonder?"

There was desperation in her reply. "Because I'm fond of you. Is that so extraordinary?"

"I don't know. It depends on what form your affection takes. I've had enough of Mother and Father's variety. You realise that, if I do come with you, I shan't feel under the slightest obligation to you?"

"I never expected it." She was almost in tears. He took no account of the generosity of her offer, the difficulties she would have to face in making it good. He was hopelessly selfish. He cared for nothing but his own freedom.

"Now I've hurt you—I'm sorry." His voice was soft and affectionate. It charmed her in spite of herself. "It comes of dealing with people like Hart, who need watching all the time. It's awfully kind of you to want to help me."

"You could write this play you were talking about." She gave a forced smile. "There's a lot of money in plays, I'm told."

"Successful ones."

"I'm sure yours would be good."

"I could write a play all right. Getting it put on is quite another matter. The difficulty's not so much in production as in marketing."

"What about this man you know at the repertory theatre?"

"I might do something with him. But he's only nibbling, you know. Nothing definite."

There was a pause. Presently he said, "There's still this question of Stuart."

"He won't mind."

"He'll hate the idea. Don't let's delude ourselves."

"He likes you more than you think."

He shook his head. "Stuart and I are incompatible. My presence is a constant reproach to him. He suspects that I'm a better man than he is and it worries him. It makes him wonder whether he has any right to his present position."

"Even if that's true, why should you worry?"

"I'm not worrying. But I don't want to embarrass you. This is going to be a nasty surprise to Stuart and he may turn awkward."

"He'll accept it."

"Perhaps. In any case it'll be amusing to see what he says."

Margaret had spoken with more confidence than she felt. Stuart was given to moods of sudden and violent obstinacy, in which he tried to compensate for previous months of vacillation. He gave way often, but never without a pang of remorse at his own timidity. He was like the patriot of an occupied country, to whom everything, from the policeman on the corner of the street to the emblem on a postage-stamp is a reminder of his servitude, to be remembered constantly and occasionally revenged in sporadic bursts of rebellion. Recently these moods of his had been less frequent. As the emotional contact between himself and Margaret had decreased, he had felt less oppressed by the force of her stronger personality. But the equilibrium was delicate. The introduction of a third person whom he disliked, and was bound to see as an ally of hers, could not do other than upset it. There would almost certainly be trouble.

When she admitted this to herself, she felt a sensation of relief. It had been comfortable behind the barbed wire, yet there was an undeniable thrill in hearing the first shot which opened up the battle. But mixed with her exhilaration was

fear, fear that the years of comfort had softened her, that she might prove unequal to the strain which would be put upon her. She was conscious of a great lassitude, a weakness that spread through her whole body, calling out to her to rest, to withdraw herself from the conflict. It was with an effort that she listened to what Michael was saying.

"I really think it's about time I had a change," he said. "Every now and then I get a powerful feeling that events are moving to a close, that I've exhausted the possibilities of my environment. I get restless. I know I ought to move on elsewhere. Whenever——" He stopped and looked at her closely. "Are you all right?"

"Quite, thanks. Just a little tired. It's late."

"You look really shot away."

"Perhaps I need a little fresh air."

They got up and prepared to go. As they left the bar, Michael said, "It was nice of you to come here."

"No it wasn't—not 'nice'. I wasn't just being a dutiful sister. I wanted to come."

"I'm sorry it had to end so badly."

She took his arm. Between them, for a moment, was an intimacy, an emotional understanding, which made all his other faults irrelevant. It was the one thing she had hoped for with her husband and never attained. She said, "I've felt alive tonight for the first time in eight years."

In the Casino, play was finishing for the night. The croupiers were counting the chips and putting covers on the tables. A group of people waited at the money-changer's desk. Among them was the American, still hanging fiercely on to the arm of his blonde, who looked sulkier than ever.

"Okay," he was saying reassuringly, "you lost my ten thousand francs—so what? Now you just come back for a drink at my hotel and forget all about it."

## CHAPTER VIII

THEY RETURNED THE NEXT DAY. Throughout the journey Michael was gay and talkative. He was never a man to feel apprehension at the beginning of a new experience. The prospect of change always filled him with pleasurable excitement, perhaps because by the end of each episode in his career he had usually worked himself into such a position that any change was bound to be for the better. Margaret suspected that, so far from dreading a possible scene with Stuart, he was looking forward to it.

Scenes were a stimulus. Moreover, they were a ground on which he exhibited a certain mastery, if only by virtue of experience. He had been through innumerable crises, and they held no terrors for him. He could keep his head and remain reasonable in face of any provocation, so that, after starting in an apparently untenable position, he often emerged, to the chagrin of his opponents, triumphantly in control of the situation.

Margaret found such personal conflicts distressing, and particularly at the present time, when she felt far from well. But, at the same time, she despised herself for her weakness. Compromise, she felt, was fatal, and the longing for it a form of cowardice. She envied Michael his indifference to the desires and opinions of others.

When they got home, Stuart had not returned from the mill. This was fortunate; Margaret was anxious that her interview with him should be planned. She sent Michael into the billiard-room, with strict instructions that he was not to come out until she called him. He made no demur. The idea of being concealed, in this cloak-and-dagger fashion, appealed to his sense of humour.

"The Missing Heir," he said. "Produced by suddenly throwing open the double doors at the back of the stage. Curtain for the Second Act."

"Never mind that. Just stay there, will you? Read the

paper or something. I'm going up to the nursery."

For several years now, the nursery had been in the complete charge of a woman named Briggs. Briggs occupied a curious position. She was an erect, ageing woman with a militant manner and a questionable degree of deafness, which she used as a defensive mechanism against those who disagreed with her. Her views on the upbringing of children were reactionary, and she would never have been engaged in the first place if her interview with Margaret had not taken place in an atmosphere of total misunderstanding. Once engaged, she was found to be almost irremovable. Both Margaret and Stuart had attempted on various occasions to explain to her that her methods were unsatisfactory and that she must either change them or find some other post, only to be defeated by an apparent incomprehension. This barrier was made more difficult to cross by the fact that she would never admit to being even slightly hard of hearing.

The matter had been allowed to sink into abeyance. Though unsuitable on theoretical grounds, there was no doubt that, practically, Briggs was extremely useful. She was devoted to Catherine to an extent which seemed to exclude any other interest, and her physical care of the child was irreproachable. Yet Margaret had never been happy about her. She sensed a certain veiled hostility in her manner, a shade of contempt. She suspected that Briggs did not think very highly of her as a mother and was perhaps secretly influencing Catherine against her.

In the nursery Briggs was sitting by the fire knitting a jumper. Catherine sprawled on the floor, playing listlessly with a rag doll; occasionally she would put parts of it into her mouth and suck them.

Margaret exchanged a few words with Briggs. It was a stilted conversation. The nurse always managed to make her feel like an intruder. As they talked, Catherine regarded them both with solemn curiosity. Briggs said, "Come along, Catherine, give your mummy a kiss."

There was an insult in the command, an inference that it



was an unpleasant duty which the child would not have performed spontaneously. Catherine kissed her mother and then went back to her doll.

Margaret frowned. "That looks unhealthy to me," she said. "Can't you get her to play with something else?"

She indicated a pile of toys, bought by herself and Stuart, of a hygienic and instructional nature. They mainly depended for their appeal on the fitting of objects into patterns, on the same principle as that used for intelligence tests, and were designed to stimulate, in a painless fashion, the development of the infant mind. Their smooth plastic surfaces held no foothold for germs, no sharp corners to lacerate the skin. Their makers, constantly aware of the danger of arousing unhealthy fantasies and morbid attachments, had been careful to avoid any resemblance to a human or animal form. They were light, unbreakable, washable, admirable in every way. Catherine obstinately refused to take the slightest interest in them.

"Yes," said Briggs fondly, "she's always liked that little doll."

Margaret raised her voice. "I said I thought it was unhealthy."

Briggs gave a sharp approving nod of the head. "Yes," she said. "Yes, she is. I put it down to cod liver oil."

Margaret regarded her suspiciously. This was often the way when Briggs appeared to mis-hear something. Her replies constituted a form of argument.

Margaret picked up the doll. "I think this ought to be thrown away," she said in a normal voice.

Briggs now seemed to have no difficulty in hearing. "Please don't, Mrs. Cardwell," she said in alarm.

"You could give her something else."

"She wouldn't like it." She searched around for support. "Mr. Cardwell says I mustn't force her to do things."

Margaret looked at her angrily. She knew well that Briggs had no scruples about enforcing discipline when it suited her book. "I don't believe the other toys have been properly explained to her."

"You can try if you like," said Briggs tartly. "I think it's a waste of time myself. She just doesn't like fitting things into slots. She likes something more personal, if you see what I mean."

"Mr. Cardwell believes that's a bad thing."

Briggs said nothing. The barrier of deafness, raised for a moment by Margaret's threat to confiscate the doll, had descended again. It was possible to guess her private opinion of Mr. Cardwell and his beliefs only by the feverish rapidity with which she had resumed her knitting. Margaret put the doll down. It had been a bluff. She had no desire to make Catherine miserable, and turn her even further towards Briggs, by removing her favourite toy. Nor, in reality, did she care very much about the hygienic side of it. It had been a test of strength, and she had lost.

She must, she thought, find more time for Catherine, talk to her, play with her. Briggs was drawing the child away from her. Some time soon she must make an effort to adjust the position. Just now it was impossible. Stuart would be arriving home at any moment.

She met him in the hall.

"Hello," he said, "so you're back."

"Did you get my telegram?"

"Yes." He hung up his hat and coat. "I hope you had an enjoyable holiday." There was a suspicion of irony in his voice.

"Come into the lounge, will you? I want to talk to you."

The lounge was full of sunlight, beating in through the french windows. It cast a searching glare on Stuart's small, pink face, causing him to screw up his eyes as if in pain. He stood stroking his hair where it had been disarranged by taking off his hat. Characteristically, he did not ask her what she wanted to speak to him about.

"How was Michael?"

"Not very good. He was living in a perfectly awful place." In an attempt to build up sympathy, she said, "He looked ill."

She studied his face for some sign of concern, but found none.

"I'm not surprised—the life he leads."

"Haven't you any feeling for somebody who's down and out?"

Stuart sat down, crossed his legs and rested his interlocked fingers on his knee, a favourite posture of his for a lecture. "I'll tell you something about Michael. You don't understand him. I'll agree with you, he has ability. But he'll never do anything with it. He suffers from a psychological disability which impels him to destroy every chance he gets. Failure has an insidious attraction for him. Subconsciously he wants to be down and out, to sit in bars talking to drunks and prostitutes, telling them what he might have done if things had been different. *Nostalgie de la boue*."

"I don't believe it."

"It happens to be the case. You must have noticed, yourself—he never seems to be in the slightest degree put out when these ventures of his capsize."

"No, it's not like that. I know how he feels but I could never explain it to you." She said bitterly, "It's all so easy for you. If he fails, you have this neat little explanation. And if he succeeds, you point out that you always said he had ability."

"I'm afraid you've lost your sense of proportion. You talk as if Michael were a matter of supreme interest to everybody. Just because he's something of an obsession in your family——"

"That's not so."

"Pardon me, it is. When you get together, you talk of nothing else."

Suddenly the argument seemed stale and tedious, not at all relevant to what she had to say. The struggle had not yet begun, and she was being exhausted by trivialities. Stuart was waiting impatiently for her to say something. He hated to be robbed of a winning position.

"Oh dear," she said, "you're making things very difficult for me."

"I'm afraid I don't understand that."

She said, "You may be right in some of what you say. But let's come down to facts. Michael's destitute. He hasn't any money or anywhere to live. Father won't do anything for him after what's happened. I couldn't just leave him there and wash my hands of him, no matter how justified everybody might consider me. . . ." She paused. Stuart was leaning forwards, blinking nervously, a film of moisture over his pale eyes, as he tried to anticipate the inevitable attempt to impose upon him. "I told him he could come and stay with us."

There was a silence. He seemed to be exploring every vulnerable aspect of her statement before commenting on it. Eventually he said coldly, "You didn't think of asking me first?"

"There wasn't time."

"Where is he now?"

"In the library."

"So you took it for granted I'd agree?"

He might have been a schoolmaster questioning a boy he had caught in some misdemeanour. Margaret knew that her best chance was to intimidate him. She prepared to work herself up into a rage.

"Certainly I did."

"I can hardly believe that. You knew perfectly well how I felt about him."

"Whether you disapprove of him or not, he's my brother. I'm not prepared to see him turned out into the street." Her voice rose, "I'm astonished at you. You profess to be a civilised human being——"

"Please, please," he implored. The sight of violent emotion always filled him with horror. "Try to control yourself. There's no need to be melodramatic."

"Melodramatic! That comes well from you. A moment ago you were talking like the outraged father in one of those Victorian plays you're so addicted to."

"Nonsense!"

"Your pomposity was laughable. I proposed a perfectly

simple, ordinary thing—asking my brother to stay with us for a while——”

He put his head in his hands. “This is intolerable! You distort everything. Michael doesn’t want to come here on a visit. He wants to live on us—or rather, on me. . . .”

“All he needs is a home for a few months, until he finds his feet. You hardly need to see him if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t want him about. It would destroy my peace of mind.”

“Then what do you propose to do? Tell him to leave the house?”

“No, certainly not!” He almost cried the words. His face turned white and his hands shook at the thought of such an appalling interview. “You asked him. You must tell him it’s not convenient. I don’t propose to see him at all.”

“If you’re going to throw him out, you must do it yourself.” She added venomously, “If you have the courage.”

As soon as she said it, she knew she had gone too far. She would have gained her point without that. Sooner than face an embarrassing scene with Michael, he would have agreed to a compromise. Now, stung with mortification by such an attack, there was no knowing what he might do.

They were neither of them completely in control of themselves. The anger which Margaret had deliberately aroused was beginning to take charge of her, and to arouse its response in Stuart. It was as if they had accidentally stumbled on the accumulated suspicions and resentments of years.

He said, “Since you have such contempt for me——”

“No!”

“Oh yes.” He spoke slowly and deliberately. There was a perverse satisfaction in knowing the worst, in hearing the spoken confirmation of bad news. “I’ve told it for a long time. You mustn’t think I’m foolish. You tolerate me for what I can give you. Love——” He halted awkwardly. The word was a bitter taste on his tongue. “Love’s a difficult thing. Nobody has a right to ask for it. But I should have liked to have had your respect.”

Margaret had an impulse to say something, anything, which would deny the existence of such a hopeless relationship. But there was an oppressive power in the truth of what he said, which could not be fought. He went on:

"You and your brother are alike. You won't accept anything except on your own terms. Because I'm not exactly what you want, I'm nothing. You want a world which fits in to your own conceptions, and nothing else will do. But other people exist. They have their own desires. They'll compromise with you if you'll let them. Otherwise they'll destroy you."

"Oh, for God's sake!" She wanted to shout at him to stop, to leave her in peace. It was an argument to which there was no end—no prospect of victory for either side. "What do you want me to do—to admit that I hate you?"

He said hopelessly, "I don't know."

The storm had subsided. They stood in silence, completely at a loss, contemplating the wreckage of the structure they had built up with such pains ever since that first decisive quarrel on the road outside Florence. It had been a frail structure, false, artificial, dependent on the suppression of all that was important between them, but it had made life tolerable. Not long ago, Margaret had felt that it must be destroyed if she was to live at all. Now that it was gone, she was overcome by fear and loneliness. Only Michael was left to sustain her

"What about Michael?" she said

"You'd better please yourself." Stuart took out his wallet and drew from it a slip of paper. It was a trump card which had suddenly become worthless. "I suppose I should have shown you this before."

She took it from him. It was a cheque made out to 'Cash'. Stuart's signature was on the bottom of it.

"I don't understand——"

"It's a forgery. The cheque was sent up to me from the bank two days ago. It was drawn out of my London account,

just before Michael left the country. You'll notice it's for fifty pounds."

There was no need for him to say more. She looked at the cheque stupidly, helplessly, until the figures began to spin round in front of her eyes, in a curious rotary motion which gradually took in all the objects in her field of vision. She gripped the arm of a sofa to prevent herself from falling. She could see Stuart, a blurred figure, rising in alarm from his chair. It was the last thing she knew before she lost consciousness.

## Part Three

### CHAPTER I

THE TREATMENT CONSISTED MAINLY OF TALK, a mutual exploration of the conflicts which had led Margaret into her present position. Her difficulties, Maynard explained, were due to a lack of confidence—she had lost faith in her own importance as an individual. His own doctrine depended on the supreme significance of individual character, so often distorted by the pressure of organised society.

"The mob," he explained, "has a mind of its own. It has its own desires, quite distinct from those of its component parts, and often even opposed to them. It has an urge to dominate, at whatever cost in cruelty and suffering. With the increasing complexity of society it has acquired an oppressive power. And yet, without the consent of the individual, it does not even exist."

About this anarchistic philosophy there was an elusively reminiscent character, which Margaret found it hard to pin down. Knowing so little about him, she could not discern its origins, deeply-rooted in the fierce Protestantism of his childhood. If he had spoken of 'conscience' or 'the soul', it would have been clear to her. But the form of words had been modified when his faith in the original inspiration of his creed had been lost. It was *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark. Yet much of the compulsive force of the poetry remained.

The effectiveness of any effort is largely dependent on timing. Maynard had found that he had an appeal for those who had reached a certain stage in their search for the meaning of existence, the stage which he himself had been in when he saw the light at the feet of Professor Delabord. He knew well



the nature of their dilemma. Engaged in an existence unsatisfactory of itself, they were unable to accept it as merely a subsidiary to some other existence immeasurably more important. To this, Maynard had an answer. Life *was* satisfactory, in terms of the individual. It was society, that shadowy, malignant Satan of his cosmos, which strove to crush it into futility. To realise this, to revitalise one's sense of personal dignity and render oneself immune to such pressures, was the way to happiness.

Maynard's\* conception of society was elastic, and had gradually come to include all outside influences, from the demands of the family to the more universal powers exerted by governments. His hold on a man so lacking in self-assurance as Stuart was understandable. At the very least, his conviction of one's personal importance was a tonic, and most of those who came to him for advice felt, at least for a time, very much better for it.

With Margaret, too, he had arrived at a favourable moment. While Stuart's discouragement was chronic, hers was acute, and very much the stronger for that; her hysterical collapse had been a headlong retreat from a situation which she had felt to be hopeless. Moreover, she had always been tormented by a feeling of being at the mercy of circumstances.

He came every afternoon, for an hour only. She often pressed him to stay longer, but his tactical sense led him to refuse—it was essential, if he was to maintain his influence, for her always to be a little disappointed when he left. He had, he explained untruthfully, other appointments to keep.

She looked forward to his visits. He understood her, she thought, far better than anyone else had ever done. She could talk to him without constraint. Sometimes, it was true, his curiosity was exhausting. He wished to know so much; he was searching, he said, for the clues, the all-important details which would give him the key to her problem. Her mind went back to the nursery at . . . ne, left untouched since Michael and she were children. Its bookshelves were still peopled with *Chums*, *The Girl's Crystal*, the *Boys' Own Annual*,

its drawers still crammed with toys and obsolete games, piled anyhow and gathering dust. It was as if she were being asked to search through all this long-forgotten litter for some object which lay hidden there, an object which had suddenly turned out to be valuable.

She began to improve. Her original attitude, one of languid acceptance of her disability, began perceptibly to change. She had an increased interest in the objects and people who surrounded her. She accepted Maynard's assertion that her illness was temporary, and that with a reassertion of her will she would walk again as before. She began to look forward to the time when she would once more be independent.

Her conversations with Stuart were at first awkward, but soon, through sheer force of familiarity, they became more at their ease. The incident which had precipitated her collapse was never mentioned. There was an unspoken truce. Michael remained in the house.

Once she said to Maynard, "Have you met my brother?"

"Yes. I've had several conversations with him."

"What about?"

"About you. I think, in his own way, he's very attached to you."

"I think so, too. But he's not an easy person to make out. Did you mention the cheque?"

"He mentioned it himself."

"There's no doubt that he forged it?"

"None whatever. He admitted as much."

"Did he give any explanation?"

"Yes. I can't remember offhand what it was, but it sounded very plausible at the time."

"It always does." She said emphatically, "I shall never trust him again."

"You mustn't be too intolerant. I believe he's suffering in the same way as yourself. He's much more sensitive than you think."

"Sensitive?"

"Yes—deep down. He puts on a casual air, but, beneath it,

I think he feels his own failure very keenly. I wish he'd let me help him."

"Won't he?"

"Not really. It's difficult to get to the root of his trouble without co-operation. But I should think it probably lies in his parents. They've expected too much of him."

After he had left, Margaret thought over what he had said about Michael. In spite of her assertion that she would never trust him again, she found it impossible to banish her affection for him. With her improvement in health, her faith in Maynard's judgment was increasing. He was not only telling her what she wished to be true, that all was not lost and if she was true herself there could be a future for her after all—he was producing concrete results at the same time. And if he was right about her, why not about Michael also? Perhaps they had both been handicapped from childhood by these 'influences' of which he spoke so scathingly. The enormity of the cheque acquired less importance if it was represented as a manifestation of a psychological disorder, a gesture against. . . . Against what? She hardly knew. But it fitted into a pattern with the rest of his behaviour, as one of a series of practical jokes against an environment he despised. If only he would allow Maynard to explain the circumstances to him, Michael might see things differently, as she was already doing. She must have a word with him about it.

In due course she became impatient to get up. At first her legs were weak and numb, but slowly a little power began to return to them. The slightest sign of improvement fortified her determination. Maynard was invaluable. He was patient and kindly. When progress was slow and she began to despair, he comforted and encouraged her. He was confident without being overbearing. Without him, she knew, she would have been helpless. It was during this stage that she ceased to think of him so much as the propagator of a theory, but rather as a person—a person on whom not only her recovery from this illness but her whole future depended.

"I feel ashamed," she said, "to think that I ever doubted you."

He smiled tolerantly. "It was natural."

"You've done so much. . . ."

"You've done most of it yourself. I simply showed you the way."

"I feel—I don't know how to put it—quite different somehow. As if everything had changed. And yet, outside me, nothing's changed at all." A spasm of energy ran through her like an electric current. "As soon as I get well—I want to do things."

"What sort of things?"

She laughed: "That's the silly part. I don't know yet. But I shall know when the time comes. I can't go on as I have been doing in the past, that's clear. I've been feeling this in a muddled way for years, but I never seemed to have the strength. Now that I've got myself sorted out, it'll be much easier. I'm not really a weak-willed person, you know."

"I'm sure you're not," said Maynard soothingly. A first faint shadow of misgiving crossed his mind. He had this in common with most men, that he could not help feeling apprehensive when women announced that they were going to 'do things'. In this business of liberating a sense of purpose it was possible to be too successful. The suppressed energies of a lifetime had a tendency to run riot.

"You'll need to take it easy for a while yet," he cautioned her.

"But I'm nearly well," she protested. She was now out of bed for the most of the day and could get around the house on two sticks. "A few weeks more and I shall be walking normally."

"Yes. I think you should." He also had made the same estimate and it worried him. For the moment she was dependent on him. Once she was able to walk unaided this dependence might decrease. She might decide there was no further need for him. He had no very high opinion of the sense of gratitude of his fellow men. It was gratifying to have

done good, but the bills were still accumulating obstinately on his breakfast table. Here at least was one direction in which her desire for action could be usefully directed.

"I was going to talk to you about that," he said. "Very soon you'll be able to manage without me."

"Oh no," she said decidedly, "I didn't mean that. After all, you've always said that my physical recovery was only of secondary importance. I want you to keep on visiting me."

This was satisfactory as far as it went. But it carried no permanent security. Something more stable was required to satisfy his bank manager. He felt unable to explain this, for fear of losing his position of authority. There were some things which rich people could never be made to understand.

"I may not be able to. I may be leaving here soon."

"Leaving!" The thought of it appalled her. It was as if she were swimming, far away from the shore, and he alone supported her head above the waves. "What do you mean?"

He said heavily, "I have a friend . . . in London. . . ."

"But you can't go now," she pleaded. "I need you."

"I may have to."

"Why?" She looked at his clothes. He still badly needed a new suit. "Is it money?"

"In a way," he said hesitantly. "It's not that I care about money for myself. But I have a wife. . . ."

She was filled with indignation. "It's intolerable that a man like you should be worried about such things. But you mustn't dream of moving on that account. Stuart can arrange something."

"I think he's tried. There was some mention of a job at the mill, but I'm afraid it's going to come to nothing."

"That's just like him—always evading issues when there's any trouble involved. I'll speak to him myself."

"Please don't agitate yourself," he said loftily. "It's not a matter of great importance to me."

"But it is to me." She spoke in a chiding, affectionate tone, as if gently reproaching him for his lack of consideration. The discovery that he had financial troubles had the effect of

humanising him for her, of bringing him down to life size. It was not so much that he was badly off—that she had always assumed—it was the fact that he cared about his poverty, and was sufficiently ashamed of it not to mention the subject outright. There was something pathetic in the oblique way he had used to approach the issue. She rejoiced in this revelation of weakness. Until now, he had given everything and she nothing—the relationship was too one-sided for her to see him truly as a person. He had been the barrister in his robes and wig, the surgeon in his mask and gown. Now he was a man—supremely gifted and inspired, it was true—but nevertheless in his heart like other men, vain, groping, and afraid.

When she did speak to Stuart she found him resistant. The day had passed when she was considered so ill that she must not be crossed in any way. And recently his devotion to Maynard had been growing more guarded. His enthusiasms always tended to move, as if by some chemical law, in inverse ratio to those of his wife.

They were sitting in deck-chairs on the lawn, enjoying the cool of the evening.

"He's been wonderful," said Margaret. "He's worked a miracle with me. You can't deny it."

"Miracle's a strong word."

"The doctors were helpless."

"Nobody," he said irritably, "is denying that he's an extremely competent fellow. But he's not Christ, you know."

"Does he have to be Christ to be given a job at your factory?"

"Has he been bringing that up?"

"No, he hasn't. I had to drag it out of him." She gave an exasperated sigh. "I fail to understand you, Stuart. At one time nothing was too good for Maynard. Now, after all he's done for me, you turn against him."

"I'm not turning against him. I believe his ideas are good—they've helped me a great deal. I'd like to do this for him."

"Then why don't you?"

"There are difficulties with the directors."

"Stuart, do you think I'm entirely ignorant of your business? Those directors were put there by your father to do as he told them. They've hardly a thousand pound's worth of stock between them."

"It's not my practice," said Stuart primly, "to ride roughshod over the opinions of men older and more experienced than myself."

"You always told me they were a lot of boobies."

This was only too true. Stuart had no choice but to change his ground. "I refuse to be harried into doing things. I was just going to fix it up," he said, "when Maynard came along with a cock-and-bull story about some friend he had in London. That got my back up——"

"And rightly so," said a bland voice. Michael put down a book on the grass and unfolded a garden chair next to his sister's. "Don't let them bully you, Stuart."

"Were you listening to what we said?" asked Stuart coldly.

"No. I caught a fragment. Something about your directors. A seedy-looking crew, if you'll forgive my saying so." He sat down in the chair. "Have you ever thought of putting me on the board?"

"No."

"It's perhaps as well. I'm too busy with my play at the moment. You'll be glad to hear that it's going ahead at great speed."

"You've found a subject?" said Margaret.

"Yes. It's to be a historical drama. About Pontius Pilate—always a favourite character of mine. History, if I may be allowed to say so, has done him less than justice. After all," he went on with some enthusiasm, "how was he to know who he was dealing with? He was only a poor devil of a Colonial Governor—somebody like Sir Thomas Thistleton, for instance. Just put yourself in his place, Stuart——" A gleam came into his eye. "Visualise yourself as a timid,

ineffectual man, in a position of authority, afraid of the Government, afraid of the people, afraid of his wife, for all I know—yet with a streak of vicious, pathetic obstinacy. . . .”

Margaret glared at him. It was a favourite game of Michael's to bait people in this way. Stuart hated it. She interrupted sharply, “We were talking about Maynard.”

Michael smiled and took the rebuke in his stride.

“Maynard? Ah, yes, an interesting fellow. . . . I've had one or two short chats with him. At the end of it he gave me what he called a ‘character analysis’, for nothing. At least I think it was for nothing. You may find it on your bill, Stuart, for all I know.” He said respectfully, “The man knows how to face facts, there's no doubt about that. Even if he is something of a charlatan —”

“A charlatan!” cried Margaret. “After what he's done——”

Stuart, too, was shocked. He protested, in the manner of a man trying to steer a sane course between two extremists. “Really, I don't see how you make that out.”

“I don't know anything about medicine,” explained Michael equably, “but I have a considerable experience of people, especially a certain sort of people. I can tell a phoney when I see one.”

“I'm sure he's completely sincere.”

“Perhaps he's kidding himself as well as you. I don't know.”

“You're just resistant to him. You don't like what he tells you.”

“He tells me what I know to be nonsense. He's like all bogus Messiahs—he's got a system and we've all got to fit into it. He flatters you by telling you how complicated you are. But I'm not a bit complicated. I know just where I stand. But I don't argue with him, any more than I'd argue with a clergyman about God. They daren't be convinced, for fear of losing their jobs.”

Later that evening, when she and Stuart were alone, she said, “What are you going to do about Maynard?”



"At the mill, you mean? I'll see. I can't tell you straight away."

"How soon will you know?"

"In a few weeks."

"Then I can't tell him?"

"No." He jerked his head irritably, as if dislodging a fly.

"I'll tell him myself."

It was the best she could do with him. He side-tracked the conversation with questions about her health.

"I'm quite recovered now," she insisted. "I feel better than I have done for a long time."

"I'm glad. I didn't want to bring up any controversial matters until you felt able to cope with them."

"Controversial matters?"

"Yes. Michael, in particular. How long is he intending to stay here?"

"Surely," she said, "we're not going to start all that over again."

"I'm not starting anything," he said defensively. "I merely wanted to know."

"I can't tell you. I haven't the least idea. All I can say, Stuart, is that he needs a rest, he needs time to adjust himself. Believe me, that business of the cheque wasn't at all important. After all, what do you care about fifty pounds?"

"It's not the fifty pounds——"

"No—I know what you're going to say—it's the dishonesty. When it comes down to it, you're as stuffy as my father." She smiled at him to take the sting out of her mockery. It was part of her pride in her present state of mind that Stuart could no longer make her angry. He was, after all, only what his environment had made him. She said, "Stuart."

"Yes?"

"Are you glad I'm getting better?"

"Why, of course." He said it earnestly, in his soft, even voice. It was, she realised with surprise, a voice made for tenderness, a tenderness that for the most part he was too timid to show. Weakness had bred a self-protective egoism

which stood like a barrier, shutting off from others everything within him that they might have loved.

"I was thinking—that night before I—I collapsed. . . . We both said some very unpleasant things."

"It's best to forget them."

"Yes. I'd like to. I want to make a fresh start. I feel I can understand you so much better now."

"Do you?" A chill, which she was too preoccupied to notice, had crept into his voice.

"Yes. I see now that I've been very intolerant. I've expected something from you that I had no right to ask for. Maynard explained it all to me."

"That was very good of him." This time the irony was unmistakable. She looked at him in surprise.

"Why, what's the trouble?"

"The trouble?"

"Yes. You sounded queer."

"I'm not in the least queer. Though perhaps a little lacking in enthusiasm. You seem to have confided in Maynard with some considerable abandon."

"It was part of the treatment."

"Quite so. And as a result of the treatment you know all about yourself and all about me and how we stand in relation to one another. We appear to have a lot to thank friend Maynard for. But, do you know, I doubt whether it's as simple as all that."

She was about to argue with him, but suddenly knew that it could only lead to further acrimony. She had been clumsy and wounded his vanity. It was useless now to try to retrieve her mistake.

They sat together in silence. Dusk had fallen, and she could see no more of him than a dark silhouette, small and gnome-like. For that moment her confidence was shaken. In this dim twilight atmosphere even Stuart acquired a disturbing air of mystery. All that had seemed so clear to her before was becoming darkened and distorted in the falling shadows.

"It's cold," she said. "I think it's time we went to bed."

## CHAPTER II

IN THE MORNING HER DOUBTS HAD ENTIRELY DISAPPEARED. Her failure to get into contact with Stuart was disappointing, but did not unduly depress her. What she felt the need of now was some gesture, some symbolic act to express her rejuvenation. The opportunity for such a gesture was close at hand, in the shape of Briggs. Her failure to remove Briggs had always been a hidden source of shame to Margaret. It appeared to her now as a typical example of the policy of apathy and *laissez-faire* which had characterised her previous life.

Briggs was on the terrace, taking the sun. She had completed the jumper and was half-way through a cardigan, of a sickly mustard colour. Margaret sat down beside her and began talking casually. She had decided on a gradual, tactful approach. Briggs was an old woman and, annoying though she was, Margaret did not want to be cruel to her. She worked up by stages—Catherine was growing up now, she would not need a nurse much longer, it was only fair to Briggs to warn her. . . . But Briggs would not co-operate in this gentle assassination. She appeared to hear less and less as the object of Margaret's remarks became clearer. She answered, when she did answer, in a series of wild *non sequiturs*. This was a repetition of the tactics which had been so successful before. But Margaret had anticipated this. She was prepared, if necessary, to strike at the very nerve-centre of her enemy.

"Briggs," she said. "I think it's time you stopped pretending. I know that you can hear what I say perfectly well."

Briggs looked up with startled eyes.

"I think I ought to be frank about this," Margaret went on. "I've tried to spare your feelings but it seems I'm wasting my time. Neither I nor Mr. Cardwell are satisfied about Catherine. I've spoken to you about it before, without any result. The truth is that your ideas on Catherine's upbringing don't coincide with ours. I think you'd be far happier elsewhere."

Briggs drew her lips tightly together. "Oh, you needn't

worry about me. I can find plenty of situations. It's the child. Though I say it myself, she's attached to me." She looked towards Catherine, who, armed with a spade, was preparing to make a flanking attack on some geranium beds. "Catherine, come away from those flowers this minute."

Margaret threw up her hands. "You see! That's the sort of thing I'm talking about. You're perpetually restricting her."

"What do you expect me to do?" retorted Briggs tartly.

"Leave her alone. Let her have more freedom."

"She can't do everything she likes."

"Within reason. Of course, she has to be kept clean and so on."

"How can I keep her clean if she spends her time in the flower beds?"

Margaret became exasperated. "You'll never understand. Can't you see—she wouldn't do it if she didn't think it was naughty. There's no real fun in breaking things and getting dirty." She decided on an illustration. "Catherine, you can go into the flower beds if you want to."

Catherine turned and looked at her indecisively. She was like a soldier receiving contradictory orders from two different officers, but without the soldier's simple solution of scrutinising their badges of rank. Her mother was presumably the more powerful. On the other hand, Briggs was in a position to take it out of her in the secluded intimacy of the nursery. She looked unhappily from one to the other.

"You see," said Margaret triumphantly, "once she's allowed to do it——"

But Catherine had arrived at a solution. Still holding her spade, she threw up her head and burst into tears.

"Now what?" said Briggs.

They both got up and went towards Catherine. On their approach she sobbed even more loudly. Great tears rolled down her cheeks, now red with exertion. Her nose was running and saliva dribbled stickily from the corner of her mouth. Margaret was conscious of her own helplessness in face of

such an emergency. She found herself waiting for Briggs to do something.

"Am I allowed to clean her up?" asked Briggs ironically.

"Of course. Don't be absurd."

Briggs took out a handkerchief, not the usual delicate ladies' article, but a durable white linen square of impressive dimensions, valuable for use as a portable towel, a first-aid bandage, or an indispensable accessory to a game of blind-man's-buff. She detached a half-sucked acid drop from one corner and proceeded to wipe the child's face, with what appeared to Margaret to be unnecessary vigour.

"Poor little thing," said Briggs. "You confused her."

When the tears subsided, she sent Catherine inside to change her dress. The two women remained on the lawn.

"I don't like the idea of losing her, and that's the truth. She's got so dependent on me."

"Not a very good thing."

Briggs did not reply. With a shock, Margaret realised that she was on the point of breaking down. It had never before occurred to her to credit Briggs with any depth of emotion. She had grown used to thinking of her, not as a person, but as a symbol of obstinate reaction, like the top-hatted financiers of a left-wing cartoon.

"There's nothing personal about this, you know, Briggs." Still the nurse remained silent. "I mean, in your own way, you're first class. I was probably to blame for taking you on in the first place. I'm very grateful for all the trouble you've taken with Catherine and I can assure you we shall be very generous financially. . . ."

Briggs looked at her for a moment with hatred, weighing the luxury of a grand gesture against the habits of a lifetime of thrift. Prudence prevailed.

"Thank you," she said miserably.

Now that victory was hers, Margaret became benevolent. "That's right. I knew you'd see it the sensible way. Mr. Cardwell and I will do everything we can to help you during this next month. You'll probably want a good deal of time

off to look for another job—we shall understand. I want you to look on us as your friends."

She turned to go back into the house. A thought occurred to her.

"Oh, and Briggs——"

"Yes, Mrs. Cardwell?"

"I think it might be better if you didn't tell Catherine till just before you leave. There's no point in upsetting her."

"You sacked her?"

"Yes," said Margaret complacently. "It was quite easy really. To think we've put up with her for all these years. . . ."

She had expected approval, but Stuart's face was doubtful. "That's all very well——" he said. It was a favourite phrase of his, an attempt to equate the logic of principle with the distasteful pressure of fact.

"You never liked her," she reminded him. "You were always saying she ought to go."

He was possessed by an old grievance. "Why do you do these things without consulting me?"

She could not tell him the real reason, that her action had been a personal proof of strength which would have been ruined by consultation—especially consultation with him. For she knew by experience that he was capable of taking the spontaneity out of any decision. He considered all issues, argued from opposing points of view, hedged, vacillated, postponed, and finally lost interest. "Stuart isn't a man," Michael had once said, "he's a committee."

"I didn't think you'd mind. The opportunity seemed good, so I just went ahead."

"As if we hadn't enough to worry about. Now we've got to find somebody else within a month."

"That shouldn't be too difficult."

"In my opinion, it will be extremely difficult."

"We can go to the agencies."

"And what should we get? Another Briggs, if not worse. They're all the same, these agency women. I can't see the

point of sacking one unsuitable person, only to exchange her for another."

It was impossible to deny the justice of this. Beaten back for a moment, Margaret said, "What would you have done?"

"I would have looked around, made enquiries. Then, when I found somebody—that would have been the time to get rid of Briggs."

It was a logical course, but such calculation was alien to her present mood. She could not have brought herself to carry on normally with Briggs, while all the time scheming to replace her.

She said, "That doesn't seem very decent somehow."

"I can't see why not. As it is, we're in a fix. The sort of person we want doesn't grow on trees."

"I'll find somebody."

"God knows how."

She racked her brains for inspiration. Stuart brooded silently.

In the end she said, "I shall advertise."

"You'll just get the same type applying."

"No I shan't. I shall advertise in the *New Statesman*."

The dismissal of Briggs led to one other consequence which Margaret had not foreseen, though if she had foreseen it, it would not have caused her to hesitate. It was the straining, almost to complete severance, of her relations with her father and mother.

Since her illness, Mr. and Mrs. Hasleton had visited her several times a week. Their conversation with her had not been without embarrassment. Much was happening that was outside their experience and it was hard for them to know what attitude to take. What, they asked themselves (they had a feeling that it might be indiscreet to ask anyone else), was really the matter with Margaret? They had a certain rough experience of the commoner physical maladies, and would have been glad to fit her into some vague but acceptable category. Friends asked them questions and they were at a loss for an answer. They craved for a germ, a stone, some

gynæcological displacement which could be described mysteriously as 'internal trouble'. On receiving hints from Stuart that her condition was psychological, dark fears took root in their minds. They had not reached that stage of sophistication where an unusual neurosis is a social asset and women exchange their obsessions over the tea-cups with the avidity of commercial travellers telling dirty stories in a dining-car. To them, any form of mental ill-health was a form of insanity, which it was the duty of the family to conceal until such a time as concealment became impossible. One phrase alone (and even that was capable of a sinister interpretation) was available to them. They decided that Margaret had had a 'nervous breakdown'.

Determined to mention nothing which might upset her, and possibly aggravate her condition, they found it left them very little to say. They had got into the habit, in common with a great many people of their age and class, of taking a despondent attitude towards the modern world. Their interest in general topics was restricted, and what information and opinions they had to give were hardly those most likely to cheer an invalid. Mr. Hasleton kept a careful eye on the dissolution of the British Empire and the spread of Communism throughout the world. Mrs. Hasleton left politics to her husband but was eloquent about the rising price of household goods and the intolerable independence of servants.

In the more localised field of their own family, they had little to act as a counterpoise to the pessimism forced upon them by happenings in the wider sphere. They were only moderately sociable and disliked most of their relations. They had never been attracted by Stuart, though the manifestations of his wealth had always left Mrs. Hasleton secretly impressed. Michael. . . .

The very mention of Michael's name nowadays raised the emotional temperature to such a pitch that sensible discussion was impossible. Since returning from London he had had no personal contact with his parents; when they came to visit Margaret, he retired discreetly to some other part of the



house until they had left. Mr. Hasleton had insisted on this, but he was uneasily conscious that such an artificial arrangement could not be indefinitely protracted. So far from having a policy for the future, he was not even very certain how he felt about the present. In one way, Margaret had solved an awkward problem by bringing Michael back to stay with her. For all he might say, he had no real desire to see his son destitute. On the other hand, it had totally frustrated any possibility of teaching the boy a lesson.

They were both also disturbed about Margaret. Especially since she had begun to recover, her manner towards them had changed. They sensed something patronising.

"I don't know what it is," said Mr. Hasleton, "but it annoys me. She talks to us as if we were a pair of backward children."

"She's always very polite."

"I don't give a damn for her politeness. She's condescending. I won't have that sort of thing from my own daughter. It's all this money that's gone to her head."

"But she's had the money for years now. She wasn't like this before."

"Well, I don't know what it is, then. But I'm not going to have it. If she hadn't been unwell I'd have spoken to her about it before. Why," he said angrily, "at times it's almost as if she was forgiving us for something."

The next time they came to see Margaret they went, as always, on a visit to the nursery before going into the drawing-room for tea. They were very fond of Catherine, and one of their complaints against Margaret was that she showed, by their standards, inadequate interest in the child. Moreover they sensed, quite correctly, that she resented their efforts to supply Catherine with the affectionate fussing which Margaret considered to be bad for her.

They found Briggs sitting there alone.

"Hello, Briggs," said Mrs. Hasleton. Briggs was a woman after her own heart. They had had many a cosy chat together, discussing such matters as the importance of woolly underwear and the efficacy of Woodward's Gripe Water in the

treatment of acidosis. There had sprung up between them a sort of alliance, of which Mrs. Hasleton felt sometimes rather ashamed, since it was founded on a mutual criticism of her daughter.

"Miss Catherine's downstairs in the kitchen with Cook. I'll get her if you like."

Briggs's manner was stiff. It was obvious that something was wrong. Mrs. Hasleton did not ask her what it was. Servants, even the best of them, were temperamental nowadays. The thing to do was to ignore it.

"No. We'll see her later. How is she?"

"Not bad. She doesn't eat very well, you know. And she's always been a nervy child."

"Highly strung," murmured Mrs. Hasleton understandingly.

Briggs thawed slightly. "Yes—that's just it. She's highly strung."

Mr. Hasleton smiled. Briggs was one of the old school. Independent but loyal. You had to flatter them a bit, though. "Still, with you to look after her, Briggs——" he said bluffly.

"I shan't be for very much longer."

"What do you mean?"

Conscious of a sympathetic audience, she allowed her resentment full play. "I've been dismissed."

"Dismissed! But why?"

"It seems," said Briggs, with immense scorn, "that I'm not modern enough."

"I don't wish to be rude, Mother, but this is my house, and Catherine is my child. I must do what I think best."

"I never thought," said Mr. Hasleton, "that I'd live to see the day——"

"The times I've heard you say that! Your life seems to have been a succession of astonishments."

"And so it has been. I give you my word, Margaret, there are times when I feel my whole world's collapsing round my ears."

"I'm sorry if I'm not adequately impressed. You see, I happen to think it was a rotten old world, for the most part."

"It hasn't done so badly for you."

"How little you understand about me! Do you think my life has been happy?"

"We did our best to make it so."

She softened. It was true. Good intentions must count for something. It was important to see them in perspective. Their possessiveness was not malignant, it was simply due to thoughtlessness. This attitude of majestic tolerance was not so easy to maintain as she had hoped. No doubt it would come with practice.

"I know you tried," she said, "and I'm grateful. But you were on the wrong track. I don't blame you for that—I was as blind as you until recently. But now I know the right thing to do, nothing's going to stop me."

"And it's none of our business—that's what you're trying to tell us?" Mr. Hasleton's eyes were bulging slightly, and his Adam's apple worked feverishly up and down behind his stiff collar. "But I won't be put off like that. When my daughter takes it into her head to make a fool of herself, it's my duty to speak."

"Well then, you've spoken. Your duty's done."

"And it's your duty to listen."

"I have done." Really, she thought with pride, she was keeping her temper very well.

"With your mind made up beforehand. What's the good of that?" He gave way to a temptation, always present in him, to dramatise himself. "God knows," he said, striking himself on the forehead, "what I've done to deserve this!"

Margaret clenched her teeth. Her studied equanimity began to wear thin. These attacks of exhibitionism on the part of her father always aroused in her a sense of outrage.

"You're behaving in the most incredible fashion," she said acidly. "I've decided to change my nurse—that's all."

"It's not all. Your whole attitude's become utterly unbalanced. Sometimes I think you've gone mad."

"Mad!" With this final insult all moderation left her. She shouted the word.

Mr. Hasleton retreated. "I don't mean literally, of course." Mrs. Hasleton felt the necessity of intervention. Particularly in view of Margaret's recent history, the suggestion had been a tactless one.

"You ought to see your father's point of view. We'd relied so much on your good sense. Especially with Michael as he is. . . ."

"Has it never occurred to either of you," demanded Margaret, "that you might have been to blame for what's happened to Michael?"

It was obvious that it never had. They stared at her in amazement.

"Yes, I mean that."

Mr. Hasleton regained the power of speech. "Of all the preposterous——"

"I knew you'd be surprised. It never entered your head, did it? But it's the truth. I don't mention my own troubles, though I may as well tell you that I hold you responsible for most of those too——"

"Margaret, what in God's name are you talking about?"

She searched for some concrete instance. Her mind went back to a question which Maynard had asked her at the very beginning of her treatment.

"Did you ever give myself or Michael any sex instruction when we were young?"

Mr. Hasleton looked wildly about the room, as if trying to find some focal point of sanity. "Sex instruction. . . ."

"Really, dear——" said Mrs. Hasleton, mildly shocked.

"You didn't! You know you didn't! We were allowed to grow up in utter ignorance. And that's not all——" She moved into a paraphrase of Maynard's lecture on the repressive forces latent in parental affection. Her mother and father regarded her with horror.

At the end, Mr. Hasleton said, "You've gone off your head."

"Don't be silly."

"You have. There's no other explanation." He turned to his wife. "Come along, Isabel. We might as well go." He had lost all his aggressiveness. He was an old man, pathetic in his acceptance of defeat. But habit was so strong that even his most genuine emotions could only be expressed in terms of melodrama. As he left, he said, "Heaven help that poor child."

### CHAPTER III

OFTEN, WHEN IT WAS ALL OVER, Margaret looked back to those summer months that followed her recovery from her illness. It was a strange time in many ways; even the weather was unusual. The sun shone almost continuously, burning the grass and filling the streets with a fine, dry dust. Water grew short, and soon it was forbidden to wash the cars or use the sprinklers on the lawns. Fountains were turned off, and the goldfish in the pool became swollen and died, floating belly-upwards among the stagnant weeds. There had been no such summer in England for at least twenty years. The papers became busy with thermometers and statistics. A famous cricketer made a record number of runs. Typists began to turn up for work in sun-suits. England, which had first regarded the heat-wave with scepticism, switched suddenly to an extravagant credulity. Mackintoshes were laid aside and forgotten. It was suggested that a permanent modification of the climate might have unexpectedly occurred.

To Margaret, the unnatural brilliance of the world about her had a parallel in her own mind. She saw everything with the deceptive clarity of a mirage. At first she was troubled by a suspicion that it was too good to be true, just as at first everybody believed that the hot weather could not last, that thunder would break through before long. But as time went

on, the very persistence of her feeling of well-being became an argument for its permanence.

There was something in the circumstances of her cure that helped to convince her. She had been dragged out of the depths of despair, out of a sense of hopelessness and futility so great that it had even negated the power of physical movement. It was appropriate that help should come at the eleventh hour, in the best tradition of romance. She had waited for long enough. Here at last was her reward for not completely losing hope.

It was some time before she began to try to work out in detail what she had gained, and what she proposed to do with it. To be well and strong was luxury enough for a start. But presently she began to be impatient for specific plans. The defeat of Briggs, and her brush with her parents, had been in the nature of a show of force, a demonstration of her new-found vitality. She must direct herself towards more important matters.

She thought often of Maynard. He continued, at her insistence, to visit her as before, though there was little that she required in the way of treatment. Now that she was less urgently concentrated on herself, she was able to take more interest in him. The day when he had confessed to being worried about money had marked an entirely new stage in their relationship. He began to speak, though guardedly, of his own life and his own ambitions.

She saw that it was a relief for him to be able to drop the façade of omniscience and confess to his weaknesses—vanity, discouragement, a longing for tangible proof of success. Such confessions did not impair her admiration of him in the least, but they made him more human, and therefore more lovable. He was, she felt, fundamentally a simple man, dominated by a great and simple idea, and always a little perplexed that it should be regarded by the rest of the world with indifference or suspicion.

"Sometimes I'm ashamed," he confessed, "that I'm so inadequate to the work I have to do."

"I don't think you're in the least inadequate."

"You don't know. I have to pretend to a confidence in myself that I don't really feel. Otherwise nobody will believe me. Ideas alone have no appeal. They have to be lighted and dramatised. I have to put on a show, to demonstrate myself as a living advertisement for what I have to say. Have you any conception of what a strain that can be?"

He hardly heard her reassuring, sympathetic answer. Now that he had taken the first step, there was a temptation to proceed even further with self-revelation. It was so long since he had dared to speak of his inner anxieties.

"One runs a risk," he said, "of leading an artificial existence. Because I'm forced into pretending to be different from other people, my ordinary human weaknesses become disgraceful, something to be concealed. I'm led into falsehood and quackery. A doctor or a lawyer, even a clergyman, can say he doesn't know and get away with it—I can't. So sometimes I find myself bluffing my way through and despising myself for it. It's a thing one daren't explain to people—they think it's a sign of insincerity. Perhaps you think so, too?"

"No," she said. "I understand what you mean. But why do you tell me?"

"I don't know. I wonder myself. But somehow I felt I had to." He said painfully, "One can't go on alone for ever."

She said, "Your wife. . . ."

"She doesn't care. She wishes I could do something more respectable."

"And more lucrative?"

He nodded. "I suppose it's natural. But it leads to difficulties. Everyone needs support every now and then. It's possible to turn for it in the wrong direction."

She looked at him questioningly. She was still on his side. Now was the moment, if ever, to tell her of the one final thing, the dreadful disaster that had overtaken him in Bristol. . . . Suddenly he knew he could not. To think of it was difficult enough—to put it into words, at the present

time, was impossible. Almost abruptly, he changed the subject.

That evening, Vera asked, "How's Mrs. Cardwell?"

"Much better now. In fact, she's pretty well cured."

"Then why are you still going so often?"

"Because she wants me to. I told her there was no real need for it, but she was insistent."

"Oh." After a short silence, she asked, "Is she getting a 'thing' about you?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"You know damn well what I mean."

He frowned. "Why should it matter to you one way or the other? You've made it quite plain you're no longer in love with me."

"I'm your wife. Your career's important to me. I don't want to see you getting into trouble." She waited for him to answer but he said nothing. "What's she like?"

"She's a very pleasant, intelligent woman."

She said impatiently, "I mean physically."

"Tall and fair . . . blue eyes. . . ." As he described her, it occurred to him how in every feature she was the exact antithesis to Vera. He wondered how it was that he had ever found Vera so physically attractive. For many years now, her dark sallowness, her thin, compact figure had aroused in him at the best indifference, and at the worst a certain repulsion. He knew that his desire to confide in Margaret and enlist her sympathy was not entirely due to a respect for her intellect, though he had at first tried to persuade himself that this was so. He was conscious of danger—danger from Vera's unreasoning jealousy, danger from his own impulses so long denied the outlet that they craved. He and Margaret had reached a stage of mutual exploration which was the preliminary to an 'affair'. There were a hundred ways in which this was demonstrated, but the most significant of all was his criticism of his wife, which she had accepted as a matter of course.



He said as a conclusion, "She's a very handsome woman, in her way."

"The Nordic type," said Vera contemptuously. "They always run to fat in the end."

It was equally clear to Margaret in what direction her interest in Maynard was moving. But she did not think of it as a danger, but rather as an enticing possibility. In future it was her right, even her duty, to seize any opportunities for happiness and self-fulfilment that offered themselves. It was a mistake to dwell too much on the consequences. She had a conviction that when the time came she would know instinctively what was the correct thing to do.

In the meantime, Maynard needed her help. It was (with slight modification) the situation she had dreamed of as a girl—a man of dignity and ability, mature in outlook and with a quiet personal charm, who lacked only the support of a woman such as herself to make him great. His wife had failed him as Stuart had failed her. She must give proof that she, and she alone, could supply the deficiency.

Soon they ceased even to pretend to each other that he still came to treat her illness. After a perfunctory enquiry about her health, they began to talk about other matters. They exchanged confidences, and indulged in the sort of shy, hesitant mental exploration which is the essential preliminary to any intimate relationship. They were neither of them young, and their circumstances were such as to preclude any precipitous advances, but gradually, without expressing it in so many words, an understanding was reached. A touch of the hand, a smile carrying a degree of warmth which would have struck an outsider as excessive . . . these were enough. And, love being what it is, they were not really conscious of the anomaly of their own situation, whereby Stuart not only allowed Maynard into his wife's bedroom to make love to her, but actually paid him to do so.

It was not long before this anomaly was demonstrated to them. One morning Maynard appeared in a state of agitation.

He did not respond as usual to her welcoming smile.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"You mean to say you don't know?"

"Know about what?"

"I thought he'd have told you."

He picked a letter out of his pocket and handed it to her. It was typewritten, on the firm's stationery.

DEAR MR. MAYNARD,

A meeting of the directors was held on Wednesday last at which the question was discussed of appointing a Health Consultant to the Huby Lane mill. I regret to inform you that though the proposal aroused considerable interest, it was eventually decided by a majority vote that no such appointment should be made at the present time. Knowing your interest in this matter I thought it was only fair to notify you immediately of this, so as not to interfere with any other arrangements you might wish to make.

I would like also to take this opportunity of thanking you for the attention you have given to my wife. She now appears to be in the best of health and I presume will not need very much in the way of future treatment.

I trust you will find the enclosed cheque an adequate payment for your services.

Yours sincerely,

STUART CARDWELL.

"But that's outrageous! What does he think he's doing?"

"I imagined you'd know about it."

"Not a word. He did it entirely on his own. The impudence of it!"

"He's made it pretty clear what he means," said Maynard gloomily. "He wants to get rid of me."

"But he can't behave like this—just on a whim. He must be suffering from delusions of grandeur. I certainly shan't take orders from him as to what treatment I have."

"On the other hand, you must see that I can hardly con-

tinue to visit you in your husband's house. It would be most embarrassing."

"I'll speak to him about it," she suggested.

"Even so—" He was firm. "— I don't think I should care to come here."

"Then I'll visit you."

"That would perhaps be better."

Margaret looked at the letter again. "Really, this is most curious—not like Stuart at all. I must confess I'm not altogether surprised about the job. Even though he did practically promise it to you."

"It seems a little shabby," he said. "Especially since I've already refused an alternative position in London on the strength of it."

"I have to take responsibility for that too," said Margaret. "I persuaded you to stay. But I shouldn't have relied on Stuart. He's acting very queerly nowadays. He seems to have changed in his attitude towards you altogether. I think he's jealous, but I'm not sure whether it's of me or of you. Before I knew you, he used to talk about you in a smug, proprietorial way, as if you were something of his that he wouldn't allow anyone to share. I used to think it was rather unhealthy. Now it's as if you've deserted him and he won't forgive you."

Maynard sighed, oppressed by the injustice of it. Such ingratitude was not a new experience to him but he had never been able to educate himself to take it philosophically. It was particularly unpleasant to learn that he had antagonised Stuart, on whose patronage he set great store. In spite of unfavourable omens, he had never given up hope of the factory job. Margaret could not know how great a disappointment it was to him to know that it was now hopeless. The job had meant to him a great many things which she never even thought of, since she had been born with them and had always taken them for granted. Not money alone, though an established unvarying income would mean a great relief from his financial embarrassments. But security, a position in society, a consciousness of being accepted. He was weary

of being an unknown quantity, an object of suspicion to bank managers and tradesmen. At present it required a vast expenditure of energy simply to maintain the impression of being a respectable person. All his charm, his strength of character, his brains, could not attain for him that degree of deference accorded by right to the most insignificant member of a more conventional profession.

He said, "It's really very discouraging."

"You mustn't get downhearted about it. Perhaps the job wouldn't have been very satisfactory anyway."

"You don't understand. Things are very difficult at the moment. Your husband's quite right in a way—you don't need much more treatment. And now that the factory job's fallen through, I honestly doubt whether I shall be able to carry on."

"What about your other patients?"

"There aren't enough of them. And then, too, as an unorthodox practitioner one tends to attract cranks. Most of them are very devoted, but they're no sort of recommendation; in fact, in many ways they're a positive disadvantage. What I'd like to do is to apply my theory on a wide scale, to ordinary people. But it seems I shall never be able to find the opportunity."

"Well, then, we must make the opportunity."

"I don't know how," he said hopelessly.

"Nor do I, off-hand. But I'm sure it can be done." Her voice softened. "Don't worry. We'll find something. I won't let you down."

"You're very kind to me."

With a wry smile she said, "We might as well face it, mightn't we—I'm in love with you. I'd do anything you asked me." Before he could speak, she went on, "No, it's all right, you don't have to say anything. Perhaps we can talk about it another time."

That evening she said to Stuart, "Maynard showed me your letter to him."

"Oh yes." He seemed quite unconcerned. "It was a pity about the job."

"He was very upset."

"Was he?"

"Yes. And so was I. Why didn't you tell me you were sending it?"

"It never occurred to me to do so."

There was a mischievous, triumphant note in his voice. She suddenly realised the reason for it. This was a reprisal for the dismissal of Briggs. And to make the score completely even, it was necessary that she should not have been told.

She had seen the trap just in time. Nothing would please him better than for her to attack him, on this particular ground.

"My main objection," she said, "was to your remarks about the treatment. It wasn't your place to say it was completed."

"Why—" he asked with a show of astonishment, "—isn't it?"

"That's for him to say."

"I'm sorry he's taken it that way. I was intending to compliment him on his success."

"You hinted that he was deliberately prolonging the treatment."

"I can assure you that nothing was further from my mind. I sent that letter with the best of intentions. And I paid him far more than his normal scale of fees."

"How much?"

"A hundred guineas."

"That's ridiculously high. Why did you do that?"

Stuart looked away from her. He said slowly, as if he placed great significance on the words, "I wished to be discharged of any obligation."

## CHAPTER IV

SOMEHOW, SOMETHING HAD TO BE DONE FOR ADRIAN (for it was as such that Margaret now began to think of him). She tried to interest her friends, but their response was discouraging. Stuart had always had a reputation for eccentricity, and she suspected that she also was beginning to be regarded in the same light. It was probable that her parents had thrown out hints that she was a little unbalanced. She told herself that these were the inevitable setbacks experienced by anyone who tried to propagate new ideas. Some method must be devised of interesting a wider, less prejudiced audience.

It was not easy to think of a way in which this could be done. There was no one in her ordinary circle of acquaintances who would be likely to help her. She thought of Michael. For all his drawbacks, he might be the very man she needed. Nobody could deny that he was imaginative and resourceful. If she knew anything of him, his scepticism about Maynard would not act as in any way as a deterrent if the project interested him.

She tackled him one day at breakfast. It was a pleasant hour of the day, when Stuart had left for work, and brother and sister were left, quietly companionable over coffee and toast. She enjoyed having him at home. He was an amusing companion and never too busy to talk to her when she felt bored with household duties and the monotony of the daily round. He hardly ever mentioned the play on which he was supposed to be working, and she presumed that it would be abandoned like all his previous enterprises. She had never had very much faith in it. But she could not feel that it mattered. Perhaps in due course he would develop some new and possibly more lasting enthusiasm. In the meantime, there was no reason why he should not just remain as he was. He was, at least, doing no harm.

After she had explained, he said, "You know my views about Maynard."

"I'm sure you're mistaken."

"We'll see. In any case that's not important. Naturally, if I can give you any help I shall be glad to. As a matter of fact, I'm beginning to get a little restless, doing nothing." He took out a cigarette from his case. It was, Margaret noticed, one of the special brand which Stuart had had sent from London for entertainment purposes. "It will be interesting to see how far we can push him."

"It's not a question of pushing him—simply giving him a chance to get known," she protested. His cynicism was expected, but nevertheless not altogether pleasant. There was obviously no hope of enlisting him as a fellow enthusiast. On the other hand it was something if he was on her side. He could be a valuable ally, and, she believed, within his limits, trustworthy. She felt that she understood Michael as nobody else did. His loyalties were few and secret, but they existed. However callous he might be where others were concerned, he would never cause deliberate harm to her.

"How do you suggest we start?" she asked. Already she was beginning to treat him as her superior in initiative. It was an attitude which had never been far below the surface, even in the time of his defeat.

He thought for a moment. Then inspiration came to him. "Eddie Lomax—he's the man we want. I knew him when I was on the paper in Manchester. He's doing very well now. He has a special column in the local rag. 'Wandering about the Town'. You must have read it."

"I have," she admitted. "But I don't like it. There's something sickly about it—rather creeping."

"But you read it?"

"Yes."

"There you are," he said triumphantly. "That's the acid test. You don't understand about journalism. Any fool can write stuff that some people want to read. To get really to the top you've got to develop a hypnotic effect—so that even people who don't like the stuff can't help reading it. Eddie's

column is nauseating, admittedly, but it's got an attraction all its own—a sort of loathsome charm."

"All right. But would he be interested?"

"There's a chance. We might get him to write something up about Maynard. I was talking to him a week or two ago and he was complaining then of being short of material." He hesitated. "Besides—if you felt inclined—we might make it worth his while."

She made a grimace of disgust. "I don't think I'm going to like your Mr. Lomax very much."

"He has his way to make, like everyone else," said Michael tolerantly. "You can't blame him. Quite honestly, I think he's your best prospect."

"What about the Editor? It's a very conservative newspaper."

"You mean they wouldn't like giving a puff to a—" he searched for a tactful method of expression, "—to a man of unorthodox views. It's a possibility, I admit. But we'll leave that to Eddie. They think a lot of him down there."

"I can understand now why you gave up journalism."

"Yes, it's true," he said, almost with surprise, "I was too honest. Nobody would believe that but you, I don't suppose. I don't criticise anyone else who does it, but I couldn't do it myself. It's not that it's a fraud so much as that it's such a shabby fraud. And they try to pretend they're doing something important."

"I suppose," she said reluctantly, "if it gets results . . . that's the main thing so far as we're concerned."

"Yes. That's the sensible way to look at it. Shall I arrange for you to see Lomax?"

"I'd better have a word with Maynard first. I haven't mentioned it to him yet. Perhaps we could go round and see him after lunch."

She rang up and made an appointment with Adrian for that afternoon.

After lunch, Michael brought her Daimler coupé round to the front door. He drove with careless assurance, like a man



born to luxury, and in sharp contrast to Stuart, who always seemed to be mutely apologising for his possessions. Margaret wondered what Michael thought about herself and Adrian. Not that it mattered, she told herself sharply, it was her own affair. Yet she was conscious of an illogical anxiety that he should at least not disapprove; that he, of all people in the world, should understand the significance of what she felt, and not see her as many would see her, as a woman of close on forty who ought to know better, making a fool of herself about a man.

"While I'm there," she said, "I might ask him about Catherine. She's awfully quiet these days. I've tried talking to her but I don't really feel she takes me into her confidence."

"Isn't she rather young for that?"

"Oh no. She's six, you know. Usually children talk very freely at that age. I'm sure it's Briggs who's behind it all. I only hope she hasn't done irreparable harm. Anyway she'll be leaving soon, thank God."

"Have you got anyone else yet?"

"No. I'm looking round for somebody whose ideas don't go back so far into the Middle Ages. I have an advertisement in the *New Statesman* this week."

She took out a copy from her bag and showed it to him for approval.

'Intell. nursmd reqd, familiar mod. ideas child training, prog. family, sal. good for right person—Box 109.'

"Rather abbreviated."

"That seems to be the usual thing. I suppose they're short of space."

"And I'd never really thought of myself as a member of a prog. family. . . ."

When they arrived, before getting out of the car, she said, "Would you like to come in?"

She tried to make the invitation, if not pressing, at least casual, as if she did not care whether he came in or not. She hoped fervently that he would refuse.

"I think it might be better if you saw him alone." He was equally casual. There was none of the archness of a man who flattered himself he could take a hint. Either he had not understood or he was being, as he could be on occasions, supremely tactful.

"I hope you don't mind waiting."

"Not a bit". He settled himself down in his seat and switched on the wireless. "I can always listen to the Programme for Schools."

Mrs. Maynard opened the door. She was dressed simply in a blouse and black skirt, with a short string of pearls around her neck; to a less critical eye than Margaret's it might have appeared that she had been disturbed in an afternoon's routine work about the house. But the skirt was new and expensive; her shoes were carefully polished, her fine black hair arranged in two diverging symmetrical waves from a central parting so as to widen the thin face; her blouse was of silk and beneath it the two cones of her breasts jutted out defiantly, with a degree of divergence not met with in nature.

Margaret assumed instinctively a slightly haughty, condescending air. Vera Maynard had dressed herself up to compete, that was plain. The act in itself carried an implication of hostility, and the cold scrutiny of the aggressive little eyes confirmed it. Within a few seconds of entering the house, Margaret was certain of one thing. Vera knew.

"Come in, Mrs. Cardwell." Her formality was faintly absurd, as if memorised from a book of etiquette. She closed the door and automatically took Margaret's coat. Then, as if feeling that this failed to live up to her assumption of grandeur, she explained unnecessarily, "It's the maid's day off."

Margaret smiled. A moment ago she had been about to make herself look equally ridiculous. The thing to do was not to talk down to this woman, but to be charming and intimate, to convey that she was so secure in her social position that her dignity had no need for artificial preservation.

"I'm so glad to meet you," she said. "Adrian's spoken about you so much."

"Really?"

"Yes. It seems funny that we haven't met before. But of course it isn't, because I've hardly been out of the house for months."

"I hope you're very much better."

"Oh yes, infinitely. Adrian's done wonders for me. I don't know how I shall ever be able to repay him."

Vera did not reply. She simply stared back in a way so insolently suggestive that it left no doubt at all of the way in which she thought the debt would be repaid. Margaret was momentarily thrown off balance. Perhaps, in the circumstances, it had been an unfortunate remark. Hurriedly she moved to less dangerous ground. Looking around the hall, she said, "This is a lovely little house you have."

"It's rented," said Vera curtly. "I'll show you in to see my husband."

Maynard rose from behind his desk to greet her. He showed her solemnly to a chair.

"I hope you didn't mind my coming," she said.

"Mind? Of course not. I see most of my patients here."

It was almost a rebuke, as if he were regretting a suggestion in what she said, that there was something secret, conspiratorial between them. She did not feel so much at ease with him on this new ground. Could it be that this mutual understanding, those delicate nuances of sympathy that had passed between them, were nothing more than the delusions of a sick-room, morbid fantasies sucked into the vacuum of an empty heart? The thought terrified her. For if it were true . . . If it were true, she suddenly and quite positively realised, the whole of these last few months had been in vain, the cure was null and void; she was back where she started. It was alarming to discover what a fragile, conditional thing her new-found confidence was.

"I didn't come as a patient," she said.

He made one of his rare jokes. "Then I won't charge you a fee."

He half-sat, half-leaned 'on the desk as he looked down at her, in one of those curious, ungainly postures he often fell into when not completely composed.

"Since I last saw you," she said, "I've been thinking over very seriously what we talked about—your future, I mean. I shan't rest until I've done something to make up for this wretched business about the job. As in so many things, it's difficult to know where to start. Once you can find the right way to go about it, you're half-way there. At last I think I've got hold of something."

His interest quickened. "Really?"

"Yes. It was Michael's idea——" She saw his face drop and went hurriedly on, "No, you mustn't be put against it because of that. You'll admit yourself that he's clever."

"I never thought otherwise. But his record hardly inspires confidence. It may be sheer bad luck that all his schemes so far have ended in disaster. But all the same. . . ."

"I don't see how any harm can possibly come of this one. And Michael won't be taking any personal part in it. He's simply offering to introduce you to a friend of his who writes for the newspapers."

"With what object?"

"To get him to write about you. That should give you the chance you need. You're always saying, and I agree with you, that if only people would give you a chance to show what you can do, most of your troubles would be over."

"One has to be careful," he said dubiously. "The wrong sort of publicity can do a great deal of harm."

"*The Evening Telegraph's* one of the most respectable provincial papers in the country. And what can you lose?"

He ran a finger round the inside of his collar and sighed. It was as if there was an answer which for some reason he was not prepared to give.

"I suppose I could see him," he said.

"Good. Then we can go ahead. Of course, there's always a possibility that he may not be interested. We haven't spoken to him about it yet. But Michael thinks we shall be able to

manage him with a little persuasion. You don't need to worry about that—I'll let you know later."

"Thank you very much." He was becoming a little less dubious. The proposition had its attractive features. The thought of having his name in the papers, of being built up as a local celebrity, appealed to his vanity. If it could be done . . . but then, she seemed confident that it could. It was a more outlandish, risky project than the factory job, and carried none of the stability which he craved. On the other hand, there was a side to him which had ambitions too sensational to be satisfied with a mere thousand a year.

He thought of the risk involved. It was a considerable one, and would increase in proportion to his success. But he was growing weary of caution. It seemed to him sometimes that he was throwing away his life in the most contemptible way, like a gambler wasting away a fortune in a succession of petty stakes.

But even if one accepted the necessity of a gamble, there was no need to be foolhardy. He returned to a point which worried him.

"About Michael. You're sure he's . . . discreet."

"Oh yes, if I ask him to be."

"You once said you'd never trust him again."

She looked at him with a puzzled expression. "But that was before you explained to me—don't you remember——?"

She repeated an exposé of Michael's character that he did not remember having made, but which, by the phrasing, was obviously his. He must have given it to her in one of those expansive moods which occasionally came over him, when he seemed to look into the minds of others with an insight which was almost clairvoyant. Such moods, he knew, were to be distrusted, but occasionally they came on him unawares. It was possible to make statements based on insufficient acquaintance with the facts, which afterwards proved to be an embarrassment. It happened to everyone on occasions, particularly to those gifted with a certain fluency of expression. But to others these lapses did not matter.

Only such a man as himself was placed in the intolerable position of having his lightest, most casual remark remembered in detail and every now and then quoted back at him as incontestable fragments of revealed truth.

"Yes, of course. . . ." He was powerless. Like the Japanese wrestler, she had turned his own strength against him.

There was nothing more to say, but Margaret lingered. She hoped that he might raise the subject of their own relationship, but he did not. In the end, she brought it up herself.

"Did you mind—" she said, "—what I said to you just before you left last time?"

"Of course not."

"I wondered. You haven't mentioned it since."

"I thought it better not to. There was always a chance that you'd spoken on impulse and regretted it afterwards."

She shook her head. "It was nothing like that."

"And then again—because of the treatment—you might have become emotionally dependent on me."

"Does that often happen?"

"Sometimes."

"I don't know," she said impatiently. "I don't care what the cause is. I know what I feel. That's good enough for me."

"It's a question of the basis of a feeling . . . the permanence. . . ."

"Permanence—who can tell about that? We have to take our chance. Or rather, I have. This may mean nothing to you at all."

She waited. He must say something now. She knew, as far as instinct would tell her, that he was interested in her, that he enjoyed her company; there was even an intangible atmosphere between them which spoke of physical desire. But there was a limit to the distance one could travel on mere inference. She had reached a stage where the thought of being away from him for any length of time was intolerable. It was essential that he should realise this, and define his own attitude in relation to it. He must tell her if the affair carried the same importance for him as it did for her. On that

would hang the whole pattern of her behaviour in the future.

"Of course it means a great deal to me," he said. "You must know that."

"If you feel differently, you mustn't be afraid of telling me. In fact, I think you should tell me now. If we're going to do anything together, it's important to know how we stand."

"I can see that," he said. "But you mustn't worry about it. Everything will be all right."

"You love me?" she persisted.

"Yes."

She came closer to him and put up her face as if it were a document waiting for him to sign. He kissed her deliberately on the lips.

Afterwards she said, "I must go now."

As he was showing her out, Vera came into the hall through another door. Michael was with her.

"Mrs. Maynard took pity on me and invited me in for tea," explained Michael.

"Will you have some too?" asked Vera.

"No, thanks. It's very kind of you, but I must get home." She said to Adrian, "I'll give you a ring next week. I hope by then I'll have something to report to you."

When they were in the car, she said to Michael, "What did you think of her?"

"Quite attractive—in a common sort of way. She was very pleasant to me. But I should think she can be quite a bitch when she feels inclined."

"Why?"

"There's something aggressive about her. She's discontented and doesn't mind showing it."

"Discontented about what?"

"She didn't say specifically, but I rather gathered that her grievance was mostly centred on Maynard. I'll bet she leads him the hell of a life."

"She sounds poisonous."

"There may be two sides to it. I'm not quite clear what she wants, but, whatever it is, she's not getting it from him."

"Probably her own fault."

His only reply was a shrug of the shoulders. Discussions of moral issues bored him; he could never see any value in the apportioning of praise or blame. Power was the only true reality. His attitude towards all situations was, he liked to believe, founded entirely on considerations of policy. Certain individuals had a tendency towards malignance or treachery, and this should be recognised, not for purposes of censure, but so that adequate precautions should be taken. He had found Mrs. Maynard's attitude mildly interesting. She had behaved with him in a way which could only be described as provocative. From his considerable experience of women he knew that he was the type which would appeal to her and he suspected that if he cared to make advances to her she would readily respond. He did not believe that she would be constrained by considerations of fidelity towards her husband.

The thought of such an opportunity did not excite him. In sexual affairs he had the tastes of a gourmet, requiring more than mere satisfaction of appetite. More refined stimuli were needed—an assault on obstinate virtue, the spice of competition with an enemy, the even more subtle pleasure of enjoying the wife or mistress of a friend. He doubted whether Vera Maynard would be worth his while.

He turned his attention back to Margaret. She was describing Maynard's reaction to her plan.

"He hedged a bit at first, but in the end he agreed. I think really he's quite taken with the idea."

"Good. I'll ring up Lomax in the morning."

"I hope Lomax will co-operate."

"Don't worry. If we handle him properly——"

"But that's just it." She came out with a thought that had been worrying her ever since Michael had first mentioned Lomax. "I don't know how to go about it. I've no experience of bribing people."

"Leave that to me. Bribery's a knack," he explained. "Not everybody can do it really well." He said thoughtfully, "You know, Margaret, when I think of the things I can do that men



with incomes of five thousand a year can't do, I'm appalled at the injustice of life. The trouble is that my talents all require a solid basis of prosperity. To start from nothing, you need all sorts of other things. Hard work, and thrift, and the capacity to suffer fools gladly. It's the first thousand that beats me, all the time."

## CHAPTER V

THE OFFICE WHICH EDDIE LOMAX OCCUPIED in the *Telegraph* building was in keeping with the tradition of the newspaper itself—solid, provincial and conservative. The *Telegraph* knew its place and was proud of it. It regarded chromium and neon with the same suspicion as crusading editorials and 'give-away' competitions to boost circulation. It had never tried to compete with the national dailies on their own ground, but had based its appeal rather on a detailed coverage of local events and a persistent and unashamed appeal to local sentiment. At a time when world events were forcing themselves with increasing urgency into the centre of the stage, it had maintained its ground surprisingly well, but the effort required for this exerted a strain on its editorial staff. They lived in the constant sensation of fighting a rearguard action. Every now and then the strain would express itself in bursts of panic and there would be demands to 'ginger-up' the paper, without at the same time robbing it of its individuality. It was at one of these times of crisis that Lomax had been appointed.

The appointment had been justified, even at the high salary which he had demanded. Lomax was a born journalist. He had a vast, superficial interest in personalities and a gift for racy description. He had no hampering compulsion about syntax or grammar, and he was not tormented by a craving for accuracy. He could cut his column to any required size without giving an impression of mutilation. His attitude towards ideas was direct, sentimental, and grossly over-

simplified. He understood the interests and perplexities of his audience in the intimate, personal way of a schoolmaster who is always just one lesson ahead of his class. Above all, he had the precious, elusive, indefinable gift of being constantly readable.

In appearance he was small and dark. He dressed elegantly, but with a startling unconventionality of materials and colours studiously designed to attract attention to himself. His bow-ties, his pastel-shaded nylon shirts, his mustard-coloured suits and maroon waistcoats, were a source of envy and ineffectual imitation to ambitious junior reporters. In the offices of the *Telegraph* he shone like a hard, bright, new stone in an old-fashioned setting.

He received Michael with the effusiveness of an old friend, and Margaret with the respect due to an attractive and influential woman. He apologised on behalf of the *Telegraph* for the shabbiness of his surroundings. At midday, in the height of summer, the room was lit by artificial light.

"If I've told them once about cleaning those windows," he said, "I've told them a hundred times. And look at that." He pointed to one of the walls, against which were heaped piles of old proofs and cuttings, whose gradual disintegration into dust and cobwebs filled the room with a musty, melancholy odour. "My compost heap. Some of those cuttings go back twenty years. The cleaners won't touch it and I can't really blame them. God knows what may be living underneath."

"Why don't you have it cleared out?" asked Michael.

"My dear fellow. These are tribal records. They'd never forgive me. In any case, I don't spend a lot of time in here. Not like those poor devils in the sub-editors' room. They never see the light of day except on Sundays." He put the cover on his typewriter and picked a pair of lemon-coloured gloves out of a drawer in the desk. "I think, if we're going to talk, we might as well go down to Jacob's." He turned to Margaret. "That's if you don't mind."

"Not a bit."

She had never been to Jacob's, but she had heard of it often enough. It was a combined bar and chop-house which had originally, in Edwardian days, been set up to cater for the lunch-time needs of business-men. With the passage of years the old Stock Exchange had been pulled down and the business quarter had moved, as ponderously and imperceptibly as a glacier, half a mile westwards. Jacob's had accepted the inevitable, take down the 'Men Only' sign which had always stood at the top of the stairs leading into its cavernous depths, and admitted all comers. Gradually it developed a new clientèle, attracted by its spaciousness, its peeling gilt *décor*, its sombre, 'period' air. It had become the last, the only stronghold of Bohemianism in a town where commerce was king. Its walls were now papered with the signed photographs of music-hall performers, and in discreet alcoves sat journalists, musicians, and the few artists and writers who had not, for one reason or another, immediately deserted the city for some more fertile soil as soon as they got the chance. Here, like early Christians in a catacomb, they could confirm their faith and even indulge in the luxury of quarrelling over its application. Where once low, knowing voices had discussed, rotundly, percentages and discounts, now, in tones more animated but less assured, the talk was of Messel and Brook, of Kierkegaard and Sartre.

Lomax was a regular and respected customer. He led them, with occasional nods to various acquaintances and a glance of disgust towards a group of noisy young effeminates at the bar, to a secluded table at the end of the room.

When he had ordered the drinks, Michael said, "Well, Eddie, I'm glad to see you doing so well."

There was no envy in his voice, only a touch of mockery. Lomax turned to Margaret.

"He means that satirically, you know," he said sadly. "He has no respect for journalism as a profession."

"None whatever," said Michael cheerfully.

"Yet he showed considerable promise." Margaret thought, how many times had she heard those words? "But he won't

compromise. He's arrogant, you know, arrogant and hard. He despises us all."

Margaret was reminded of the solicitor, Hart. Michael had a curious effect on his friends, just the reverse of what might have been expected if one had simply known of his career and his present position, without actually meeting him. They seemed to regard him with a mixture of resentment and respect.

"How are you liking this present job?" asked Michael.

"It's a step, of course," replied Lomax cautiously, "a distinct advance. Mind you, it's a tough proposition, running a human-interest column in a town like this. I have to pocket my pride sometimes. You'll never guess what I'm on at the moment."

"What?"

"Fairies," he said disgustedly. "No, not the ones at the bottom of your garden. Real ones—pantomime fairies. What happens to them in the summer-time? Where do they get to?" He cast a jaundiced eye over the group at the bar, chattering at the tops of their voices like a collection of highly-coloured tropical birds. "If you ask me, most of them are in here."

Michael took the opportunity to introduce the topic they had come to discuss.

"We may be able to give you some material," he said.

Lomax raised his eyebrows. His tiny, delicate little fingers twirled the stem of his glass. He was grown suddenly cautious. Michael's method of approach did not deceive him in the least. He was about to be asked a favour.

He listened to what they had to say with a close attention which heartened Margaret. In an affair such as this, so much depended on a sympathetic attitude on the part of the listener. It would have been so easy for him to make the cheap sneer which would have made it all seem ridiculous.

"Yes," he said cautiously at the end. "I might be able to use it. Of course, you realise, I've got to be careful. I don't want to stick my neck out. You see," he explained with attractive candour, "I've got to think of my own position.

People are always trying to talk me into making a story out of something or somebody that they're interested in. Usually I won't play because they're the sort of thing that nobody but the people concerned give a damn about. This is different. Put over properly, it could have a wide appeal. It's been done before——"

"Everything's been done before," said Michael.

"Yes, I know. I wasn't putting that as a point against it. But one can learn from previous experience. If it comes off, well and good. But if it misfires, it misfires badly. The very merits of the story help to make it dangerous. Everybody's interested in sickness. At least half the world's unhappy and it doesn't know why. They've taken it for granted for years that there's nothing to be done about it. Now someone comes along with a simple solution, a short cut. It may be Spiritualism or Christian Science or Communism or Breathe Your Way to Health or any one of a hundred things. They're suspicious—they've been had before—but fascinated in spite of themselves. Supposing—just supposing—it could be right, that everything is, after all, as simple as they always believed it was when they were kids and hadn't found out about war and income tax and unemployment and husbands coming home drunk and smelling of Californian Poppy. Deep down, they're full of faith—they wouldn't spend half a crown a week on the Pools, at a million to one against, if they weren't. Their scepticism's only skin-deep. If they read something in the paper, they're inclined to believe it, if only because they've got to believe in something. You may laugh, Michael, but I feel I have a great responsibility to my public."

He looked solemnly across the table. There was no doubt at all that he meant what he said. Margaret began to understand the secret of his success. It was not mere cleverness. He, like his readers, had a simple faith, a faith in himself and the importance of his own job. It was, she suspected, a conveniently malleable form of belief, easily adjusted to overlook any moral deviations in the interests of an effective 'story', a piece of technical virtuosity calculated to attract the

admiration of his colleagues. And yet, it was there. It gave him purpose. And, almost as essential, an instinctive understanding of the enthusiasm of others.

He went on. "You see what I'm getting at. If you raise hopes in people and then let them down, they'll turn on you. I've got to give them something for their money."

"You needn't be afraid," said Margaret. "Maynard won't let you down. He's genuinc. After all, I have reason to know."

"That's true," conceded Lomax. "I don't deny that your personal experience is impressive. But can I use it?"

The question was unexpected. Margaret felt his little dark, inquisitive eyes regarding her with a searching, almost clinical curiosity, as if this was to be made a test of her own sincerity. If she refused, he would be justified in regarding her request as an eccentric feminine whim. She was angry with herself for not having anticipated it. She recoiled from the thought of her greatest, most intimate personal experience, exposed to the public gaze. She felt herself blushing furiously, ridiculously. It was as if he had asked her to walk naked through the streets.

"Is that absolutely necessary?" she almost pleaded.

"I don't know. It would depend on what else I could dig up. It ought to be something dramatic. And you have the advantage of a well-known name. You'd be surprised what a difference that makes. But if you couldn't face it——"

Put like that, she was lost. She had said to herself that she would do anything to give Maynard his chance. It had been a magnificent resolve but she had not gone into the details of possible sacrifices. Now that a concrete suggestion was put before her, she was shocked. Nevertheless, it must be done. She only hoped that Maynard would appreciate fully what she was doing for him.

"Use it," she said. "Use it if you think it's for the best."

Lomax nodded. He had no idea of the effort which had been required of her. Experience had led him to believe that there was no one, no matter how emphatically it was asserted to the contrary, who was not secretly delighted at the thought

of seeing his name in print. Michael, who knew better, was disturbed. He realised that he had underrated the intensity of his sister's involvement with Maynard. To the very limited extent in which he allowed himself to be concerned about the affairs of others, he was worried for her.

"So far as it goes," Lomax was saying, "he's on to a good thing. He's in the mood of the moment. The individual is in fashion at the present time. We're all tired of being treated as groups—social, economic, psychological, and all the rest of it. We want to feel that we, personally, mean something. We're even prepared to take the can back for being what we are, to talk about responsibility and sin. You've only got to look at present-day literature. Eliot, Mauriac, Greene—they're riding the tide. That's where your man ought to come in. Can he write?"

"He's written one book."

"I'll read it if you like. But that's slow, of course. For quick results you need an organisation."

"I don't know what we can do about that," said Margaret helplessly. It was all beginning to appear very difficult.

"It's a tough job, building up your own. The way to do it, if you can, is to make use of somebody else's." He pondered for a moment. "Does he believe in God?"

"Why—I don't know——" said Margaret, confused. God was one of those things one didn't ask about. It was vaguely improper.

"It's important. God," he pointed out significantly, "has an organisation."

"I'll ask him," she said.

"Never mind. I'll ask him. I'll give him a personal interview. Then I'll see what can be done. Will that suit you?"

"Oh yes," she said gratefully, "and thank you very much. And, if you don't mind, I'll leave you now. I have an appointment." This manoeuvre had been arranged between Michael and herself beforehand. "Now you can talk about old times to your hearts' content."

When she had left, Lomax said, "I like your sister."

"Yes. She's a good sort."

Lomax looked down at his glass of sherry. It was still over half-full, for he was a poor drinker. He was afraid of alcohol. Too many promising careers in journalism had been lost that way.

"Just between you and me," he said, "what's all this about? Is she stuck on the fellow?"

"Yes," said Michael, "I'm afraid she is."

"Some of them are plausible talkers."

"He's more than that. I think he half believes in it himself."

"I suppose it is just bunk."

"Of course it is." Michael looked at him searchingly. "Don't tell me you're ready to be converted."

Lomax sighed. "You're a sceptic on principle, Michael. But for me—at times I have a feeling that there must be . . . something. And I couldn't help envying your sister. She was so wonderfully certain."

"I'm glad you're so sold on the idea. What are you planning to do?"

"A lot will depend on the man himself. If he's good material, I'll do a column on him." As he began to think from the technical point of view, his voice lost its wistful note and became brisk, businesslike. "I shall probably have to sweeten him up a bit. Have you any idea where he was born?"

"No."

"It doesn't matter. We'll say he's a local man—nobody's going to ask him for his birth certificate. The *Telegraph* would make out a case for Jack the Ripper if he was brought up locally. Solid North Country common sense allied to vision, the sort of vision which turned a few square miles of barren moorland into the industrial power-house of Britain. You see the dodge," he added in parenthesis. "You tell them they've got imagination themselves—that makes it respectable." He went on, "The way I see it, Maynard's a down-to-earth character. Nothing fancy about him. But he's got something—something to show. Hard facts. He raised a beautiful, paralysed woman from a bed of sickness——" He was



growing more and more carried along in the grip of his own virtuosity. He was struck by a final inspiration. "A Lancashire Lazarus!"

"That sounds blasphemous to me. And you've got it wrong. It was Christ who did the raising. Lazarus was the dead man."

"Was he?" said Lomax in surprise. "I always had the idea— Well, in that case I can't use it, can I? Lucky you told me. That would have got me across with the religious boys from the start. And I have great hopes of them. I know one in particular who's going in for the Spiritual Healing racket in a big way."

Michael said, "This is going to mean an awful lot of trouble for you."

"That's all right. It'll be a change from the fairies."

"We wouldn't ask you to do this for nothing," he said significantly.

Lomax stared at him for a moment, and then laughed. "My dear Michael, those days are over. They pay me very well on the *Telegraph*." As if anxious not to give offence, he added, "But it was a kind thought."

Michael raised his eyebrows. No, the man was not being coy. He really meant it. "I must say," he admitted, "you've surprised me."

"I suppose so. But then you've always flattered me by believing that I'm much more unscrupulous than I am. You don't understand honesty, Michael."

"You're quite wrong. It's one of the things I do understand. I understand honesty and I understand dishonesty. What I'll admit I find it hard to understand is how certain people I know seem to be able to occupy a curious position between the two. Maynard, for instance: he's not a complete, honest-to-God fraud—I could respect him more if he was—but he's not completely genuine either. And you, turning on suitable emotions like a tap. You'll believe anything if you think it'll make a good column, and without the slightest qualm you'll sit down and think out a spanking collection

of lies to prove it's true. But you won't take money for doing it. It's beyond me."

Lomax nodded slowly and thoughtfully. He did not seem in the slightest degree upset by Michael's accusations. "You know," he said, "you were quite right to leave journalism. You lack that touch of human sympathy which makes all the difference."

## CHAPTER VI

"MRS. NIELSON?"

"That's correct."

"Please sit down."

Margaret glanced covertly at the girl as she made a pretence of finding her letter of application from the rest of the papers in the pigeon-hole of the bureau. This subterfuge was hardly necessary since Mrs. Nielson was not looking at her, but was staring, though without any real interest, out of the window. She was not, it seemed to Margaret, a very self-conscious person.

In appearance she was by no means unattractive. Her age was somewhere in the late twenties. She was naturally blonde and wore her hair long; it rested becomingly, if a little untidily, on her shoulders, and had a tendency to fall forward when she bent her head, obscuring her blue, contemplative eyes. Seated in a chair, she was heavily, placidly graceful, but her legs were both too short and too thick for perfection—in haste, if such a thing ever occurred, she would be inclined to waddle. Her clothes were obviously good, but not chosen with care, and she showed no sign of being conscious of incompatible colours. Altogether she gave the impression of a woman who, through a slight disproportion of build, had just missed beauty, and was at the same time insufficiently interested in herself physically to try to conceal the fact.

Margaret was impressed by her composure. She had

already interviewed five other applicants and the experience had been a dispiriting one. Some had been dark, intense and dogmatic; they had lectured her obliquely on her duty to society and one had gone so far as to leave a copy of the *Daily Worker* on the hall table. Others had been thin and wispy, resting their hopes of employment on a fervid desire to please and a diploma in folk-dancing. Margaret had asked them all a few questions out of politeness, hardly listening to the answers.

She had left Mrs. Nielson to the last on purpose. Her letter of application had been more promising, not from the information it gave (it gave extraordinarily little) but because it somehow indicated a person of character. It had been typed, plainly by herself, and had been full of roughly-corrected errors. It had the character of an informal note, yet with the allusive flavour and careful avoidance of clichés characteristic of literary people, who write the most casual messages under the consciousness that one day they may be included in somebody's memoirs. Finally, Mrs. Nielson, alone among the applicants, had demanded her first-class railway fare, which Margaret found oddly reassuring.

Margaret began on her routine list of questions.

"Have you any previous experience?"

Mrs. Neilson turned her attention back from the window. Her expression showed boredom tinged with disappointment. She made Margaret feel that it was a very dull question to have asked.

"I suppose it depends what you mean. I've had two children of my own."

"Oh." Margaret was puzzled. "Where are they now?"

"My husband took them."

She spoke without any sense of grievance—indeed, with something suspiciously like relief. She might have been referring to some valued yet cumbersome piece of family treasure, a pair of ornamental vases set of Sir Walter Scott.

"Are you divorced?"

"Separated. My husband hasn't any right to the children,

but he's gone to South America and taken them with him. There's nothing much I can do about it, is there?"

"It sounds dreadful."

"Yes," said Mrs. Nielson placidly. "However, one gets over it. It happened several years ago, you know."

"If you'll excuse my asking, why did your husband leave you?"

"It was I who left him." She regarded Margaret with her liquid blue eyes, woman to woman. "He failed to satisfy me emotionally."

This she seemed to consider a completely full and satisfactory explanation. It was, perhaps, advisable not to pursue the matter any further. There was no knowing what intimate details of marital incompatibility she might reveal in that languid matter-of-fact voice. Margaret shifted her ground.

"Are you interested in working with children?"

"Oh yes. Though I don't believe in interfering with them a lot, you know. I think they ought to be allowed to grow up in their own way."

Margaret warmed towards her. Though not everybody's idea of a children's nurse, she was on the right lines.

"I can do the routine jobs quite well," went on Mrs. Nielson. "So can anyone with a spark of intelligence if it comes to that. Women," she said with a touch of contempt, "like to make out that there's something difficult and mysterious about bringing up children. It's all bunk. They make difficulties for themselves by fussing." She said, not with pride, but as one stating a fact, "I never fuss."

It was easy to believe. Theoretically, her attitude was ideal. A more complete antithesis to Briggs could not have been imagined. Yet Margaret could have wished for a little more enthusiasm. She reproved herself for her lack of logic. It was the sort of contradiction she despised in others, this revulsion in practice from what she approved in theory.

"I see from your letter that you're a University graduate?"

"Yes. French Literature. It wasn't a very good degree," she added indifferently.

"All the same, wouldn't you be rather wasted in a job like this?"

"Oh, I don't know. One has to be practical. My degree doesn't help me very much in earning a living. I get occasional translations, and that's about all. Incidentally, I could teach the child French, if you're interested."

"Yes. That would be a very good idea." Margaret was enthusiastic. It would be a considerable advantage to Catherine to grow up bilingual. She was at an excellent age to learn.

The imminent departure of Briggs, and a profound disinclination towards starting the whole business of advertising and interviewing all over again, were already predisposing her in favour of Mrs. Nielson. This final proposal was sufficient to make up her mind.

"Perhaps now," she said, rising, "you'd like to come upstairs and meet my daughter."

The following week Mrs. Nielson moved in, preceded by a large and varied assortment of luggage, including two tea-chests full of books. Briggs, who carried her meagre stock of belongings from place to place in a pair of stout cane hampers like enormous picnic baskets, did not attempt to disguise her disapproval of such pretensions. She became increasingly difficult as the time for her departure approached, and chose to regard the two months' advance wages which she had been paid, not as generosity so much as proof of a guilty conscience. She spent a great part of her time with Mrs. Bellamy, the cook-housekeeper, an old crony of hers, receiving sympathy and prophesying disaster.

Both Margaret and Stuart had been anxious as to how Catherine would react to the change. She cried a little at first, but did not show the dramatic signs of bereavement which Briggs had led them to expect. After a few days she seemed to have forgotten Briggs's very existence. She was perhaps a little more pale and silent than usual, but then, Margaret reflected, she had always been a somewhat introverted child. It was a defect almost certainly inherited from

Stuart, who had similar moods. She would perhaps improve under the new régime.

After Mrs. Nielson had been installed for a few weeks, Margaret began to congratulate herself on her choice. She adapted herself with astonishing ease to her new environment. The initial hostility of Mrs. Bellamy passed by her unnoticed. She had the gift, unusual in women, of being able to live on terms of tolerance or indifference with others of her sex. She was equable in temperament and completely self-sufficient. Though prepared to engage intelligently in conversation when the occasion arose, she was not dependent on it, and was utterly indifferent to gossip. With Catherine she was patient and kindly in her own casual way. She was indifferent to noise and never lost her temper, but she showed no trace of the intense personal interest which Briggs had thrown into her work. If it had not been for that one remark about her husband, it would have been possible to put her down as a woman of congenitally shallow emotional development, incapable of feeling any strong affection for anybody.

The nursery began to take on the imprint of her own personality. It lost its neat, orderly, antiseptic atmosphere. Briggs's most stringent rule, that one game must be packed away before another was taken out, passed into disregard. Cards became lost, counters confused, dolls, obscenely mutilated, were thrown into one or other of the tea-chests, now unpacked and placed against the wall as depositories for rubbish. Mrs. Nielson did not knit. Instead, she sat for long hours with a book on her knees, making occasional notes or marking off passages in pencil.

Catherine's own appearance became similarly modified. She was perceptibly thinner, a fact which at first was a cause of concern, until it was explained that this was due to the abandonment of the double layer of woollen underclothing previously considered essential to her health. She showed an increased freedom of movement but a sharp deterioration of posture and manners. Her hair was often tousled and her face not over-clean.

"She's beginning to look a little wild," Margaret said one day to Stuart.

"Is she? I hadn't noticed."

He was in one of those phases when Catherine hardly existed for him. Just before Briggs had left, he had worked himself into a state of extreme agitation. The gloomy prognostications of the old nurse had found fertile ground in his naturally apprehensive nature. He had a deeply-rooted dread of change, to which he freely admitted. It was one of his most disconcerting attributes, this unusual insight into his own weaknesses. When Margaret had first known him, she had been disarmed by this evidence of honesty. Now it aggravated her impatience with him, that, while recognising his faults, he should do so little to control them.

His aversion to change he justified on the grounds of experience. "In my life," he explained, "I've seen a great many changes, and, so far as I'm concerned, they've all been for the worse." For a man of his type, living in the present age, this could hardly be contested. But to extend such an attitude into the smallest details of domestic life appeared to Margaret as a perversion of logic. It led her to the conclusion that he was giving way to a temptation which at times seduces the most penetrating of minds, of basing a philosophy on his own emotional predispositions, and then searching for suitable facts to justify it.

He had refused to take any responsibility for the dismissal of Briggs, on the grounds that it had been done without his permission. He was genuinely shocked at Margaret's contention that his frequently-expressed desires were evidence of complicity. To him desire and action were so completely divorced that he would not admit of any connection between them. To Margaret the wish implied not only an impulse to act but a positive duty. It was a gulf between them which could never be bridged.

Stuart had thus been forced into the frame of mind of a Parliamentary Opposition which is compelled to foresee the direst consequences of any measures initiated without their

consent. His interest in the actual issue in question was superficial and transitory. When nothing of any importance happened, it was almost completely forgotten. Only in the depths of his memory, like a small paragraph in *Hansard*, his protest lay recorded, to be resurrected if ever the opportunity should arise.

"Still," Margaret went on, "we can't have it both ways. And Catherine's already beginning to pick up a few phrases in French." She waited for comment but he made none. She had the common feeling that half his attention was elsewhere. "What do you think of her?" she asked abruptly.

"Catherine?"

"No. Mrs. Nielson."

He directed his mind to the question, frowning judicially. "It's a little early to say—but my opinion, on the whole, is favourable."

"She's intelligent."

"Oh, extremely. I've had one or two conversations with her. She lived in Paris for two years—met some very interesting people. Did she tell you," he said, with a note of awe in his voice, "that she knows Herbert Blessington?"

"No."

"Well, she does." He spoke as if this proved something. Herbert Blessington occupied a unique place in Stuart's world. He was the only modern novelist for whom he had any respect at all, and to him had gone all the devotion which a man of more catholic tastes might have spread over the whole field of twentieth-century literature. To Stuart, Blessington was a lone, confident voice giving him hope in a despairing world. His careful, delicately-chiselled sentences, his subtle, inferential dialogue with its refusal to be trammelled with the mere vulgarities of present-day speech, his insistence on permanent philosophic truths, all combined into a valiant assertion that civilisation, though partially submerged, had still got its head above water. Blessington did not retreat from modern events; indeed, he was so bold as to make them the main material of his work. But he insisted on regarding



them loftily, with an icy classicism which reduced them to the level of a series of malignant but fundamentally ineffectual intrusions on the development of man towards perfection; as if, in fact, they were already history, and of a rather despicable period at that.

"She seems to know him extraordinarily well," said Stuart. "To tell you the truth I began to wonder whether she hadn't been his mistress at some time or another. He had quite a reputation, you know."

"So I believe." It was an interesting subject for speculation. Mrs. Nielson would, she thought, make a very suitable consort for a man of letters. In her sphinx-like imperturbability he could read whatever depths his extravagant fancy craved. She was desirable, discreet, and an excellent listener.

"Of course, she may be romancing. But I don't think so. I can hardly imagine her taking the trouble."

He spoke with the solemnity which he reserved for 'significant' people. There was a time when he had used that tone about Maynard. Margaret wondered hopefully whether he was developing an interest in Mrs. Nielson. He might be tempted, not only by the woman herself, but by the prospect of a flirtation, at one remove, with the great Blessington. Her hope was not a very strong one. Even if such a possibility occurred to him, he would never have the resolution to put it into practice.

"She tells me she's thinking of writing a book herself, now that she has plenty of spare time. A critical study of Proust. She's made a very detailed study of the novels."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. Though, mind you, she's on the wrong track. She underrates the importance of the Baron de Charlus. Women haven't much grasp when it comes to homosexuality."

Stuart's approval of Mrs. Nielson, though given to her rather as a person than as an employer, was gratifying to Margaret. This was the first project she had carried out on the basis of her new scheme of life, and it showed every

sign of succeeding. To add to her satisfaction, it had been done entirely on her own, and, indeed, in the teeth of opposition. In a restrained way, she tended to brag about it to such of her friends as were inclined to listen.

She was particularly eager that Maynard should see what had been accomplished in his name. It was not long before the opportunity arose.

One morning Mrs. Bellamy asked to see her. It was, she said, a matter of some importance.

"Well, what is it?" asked Margaret impatiently. She was growing tired of Mrs. Bellamy. Nowadays she carried always with her an air of restrained disapproval, bequeathed, as it were, from Briggs. In her new capacity as a reformer, Margaret found herself more demanding with her subordinates. They must give not only service, but loyalty. If Mrs. Bellamy did not improve, she thought grimly, she would be the next for the axe.

"It's this, ma'am." She produced, as if by a conjuring trick, a wastepaper basket in which were some broken fragments of pottery. It was a vase of which Stuart had been particularly proud.

"How did you do it?"

"I didn't do it." She raised her voice indignantly at the assumption. "I've always been particularly careful about that vase, ever since Mr. Cardwell told me it was valuable. I dust it myself once a week. And I never let the maids touch it."

"Then who did break it?"

"Miss Catherine. I saw her with it and told her to put it down. And she just threw it down—bad-tempered like. It's my belief she broke it on purpose."

"You must have frightened her."

"Frightened her!" She looked upwards, calling on Heaven to witness this injustice. "She wasn't frightened. It was just badness—rank badness."

"I don't think you understand children."

"I ought to. I've brought up a family of six."

"Really, Mrs. Bellamy, I don't think that's a very good point to raise."

Mrs. Bellamy's face turned deep red. She was a widow who had been forced to go out to work because her children had refused to support her. One of the boys had been to gaol. Margaret had never mentioned this before. She was angry with Mrs. Bellamy for driving her to it.

"It's that Mrs. Nielson——" said Mrs. Bellamy doggedly. Though worsted in the encounter, she lacked the flexibility of mind to change her plans and retreat. When she had prepared to say something, she had to say it. "She encourages her."

"She needs encouragement."

"Not of that sort." Conscious that she had gone far enough, perhaps too far, she added hastily, "Of course, it's none of my business——"

"No. That's true." On the verge of giving Mrs. Bellamy notice, Margaret decided that it was not quite the time. Later, perhaps, when things had settled down, she might consider it. In the meantime, she must be made to realise where she stood. "And I want you to know that I have complete confidence in Mrs. Nielson. I'm aware that you don't like her and I know why. It's quite useless for you to try to influence me against her. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Mrs. Bellamy breathed heavily. "I understand."

All the same, it was annoying about the vase. Stuart would have to be told and he would be put out. He would want to blame somebody. Mrs. Nielson ought to be warned.

When she saw her later in the morning, she mentioned the vase.

"Mrs. Bellamy was telling me about it," Margaret said apologetically. "I suppose it was an accident."

"Well, no—I don't think it was. My impression was that she wanted to break it."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I mean, they don't they? Perhaps she took a dislike to it. After all, it was a pretty ugly piece of work."

"It's said to be worth a lot of money."

"Is it?" Mrs. Nielson conveyed that she regarded this statement as an irrelevance. She was correct, Margaret reminded herself. It was so easy to fall into the provincial way of valuing everything in terms of money. "I was never very keen on it myself," she admitted.

"There you are. Children know about these things. Not that in all honesty I can put it down entirely to a form of art criticism. She's rather fond of breaking things generally."

She told of various other articles which had been smashed, burnt, or defaced. It was an impressive list. There was nothing else of great value on it, but that was perhaps from lack of opportunity. Margaret was a little disturbed.

"I haven't stopped her," said Mrs. Nielson. "I thought the best thing was to ignore it."

"Yes. I agree about that. And we ought to make certain there's nothing serious behind it. I'll ask Mr. Maynard."

Maynard was in good spirits these days. Lomax had been to see him and the interview had gone well. He was a man who reacted strongly to changes of fortune and, under this encouragement, ambitions which had lain dormant for years began to revive within him. He had spoken boldly and fluently, yet with becoming modesty. Lomax had been impressed.

"He's going to do an article on me," he said to Margaret. "I don't know quite how soon."

"I'm glad you liked him."

"We took to each other at once. A very able man. And remarkably well adjusted. I'm surprised he's still working on a provincial paper."

"He's in rather a special position, I believe. And Michael thinks this is just a step for him. He should get to London pretty soon."

"I should imagine so."

"And if he does, he could be very useful to you."

"Perhaps. Perhaps." It was a congenial thought. "But we mustn't look too far ahead. Let matters take their course."

"Oh, I don't agree with that. We have to direct them," she said decidedly.

He started. Flat contradiction, from anyone else but his wife, always came as a shock to him. He had been talking idly, not meaning anything very much. He wished she would not be so literal. It was, of course, because she was in love with him. In his present mood, he could regard her devotion in a gracious, Olympian manner. It was like those days at the beginning, not the very beginning when he had been secretly sweating with nervousness and she aloof and suspicious, the great lady; but the time just after that, when he had gained her confidence and they had both realised that the cure was going to work. At times like these he felt invincible, supreme. He forgot, miraculously, the other times, when money was short and Vera was at her worst, when the indifference and hostility of the world suddenly descended on him like a heavy hand grasping his shoulder in the street. . . . Then he could have wept for the loving glance, the word of kindness that later seemed almost an intrusion.

No doubt, he thought now, she was eager for appreciation.

"I want to thank you for what you've done," he said.

"It was nothing," she said briskly; yet she was pleased. "In any case, I'm going to ask you a favour in return. I'd like your advice about Catherine."

At one of the other times Maynard might have taken fright at this point. He might have told, not the truth, which was that he did not understand children and had never had the success in gaining their confidence that he had with adults, so that they almost disliked and distrusted him; it would never do to say that, but at least he could have invented some plausible excuse to get round the difficulty. But today he felt equal to anything. What he could not accomplish, he could bluff.

In any case, as explained by Margaret, it did not seem a very serious matter. Women always worried far too much about their children.

"Perhaps I could have a little talk to her," he suggested.

Margaret showed him to the nursery, introduced him to Mrs. Nielson, and then retired. It was always much better, Maynard explained, for the mother not to be present. After about half an hour he returned.

"I've been into it very thoroughly," he said, "I'm sure you don't need to worry. I gather she's living a much freer life now——"

"I thought it was better."

"I quite agree. But it takes time for her to adapt herself. If you take somebody out of a strait-jacket there's a certain clumsiness at first. They tend to fall down. It's the same with the mind. I should just ignore it. Let her find her own way."

"Yes," said Margaret. "That was what I thought. But I wanted to be sure. Incidentally, what did you think of my new nurse?"

Maynard hesitated. He had anticipated this question, but it had not helped him to think of an answer. In fact, he did not know what to make of Mrs. Nielson. She was something outside his experience.

"A remarkable woman," he said, ambiguously. "A very remarkable woman indeed."

## CHAPTER VII

"GOOD GOD!"

Stuart opened his *Evening Telegraph* and recoiled, like a man who has just noticed a caterpillar in the middle of his salad. Then he read on, as if by some ghastly inner compulsion condemned to eat the salad, caterpillar and all.

"Margaret—have you seen this?"

"The thing about Maynard?"

"You *have* seen it? Why didn't you tell me? It's dreadful—dreadful. I can't imagine what he thinks he's up to."

"Lomax?"

"No," he said impatiently. "I've learnt never to be sur-

prised by anything from a journalist. I meant Maynard. This is a personal interview."

"It's publicity."

"I should think it is. The man makes him sound like a sort of Hot Gospeller. And look at this description: 'kindly and serious eyes with just a touch of sadness. A domed forehead——' Oh no, really, it's too appalling."

"You can't blame Maynard for that."

"Perhaps not. But what about this stuff about 'bringing a new ray of hope into the lives of the mentally maimed'? And how does he come to be of an old Graftondale family? He told me himself he was born in Cardiff."

"Those are just details."

"Details. Yes, of course," he said with heavy sarcasm. "How silly of me to forget. It doesn't matter if they're true so long as they're just details. Why, you could say——" His voice stopped as his eye caught the last paragraph of the article. Up to now he had been indulging in a show of indignation which was largely detached. An acquaintance of his had decided to make a fool of himself. It was only now that he realised that he might be personally involved.

He put down the paper.

"You've read it right through?" he said.

"Yes."

"He actually had the impudence to mention your name. If he was a doctor, he could be struck off the register for that. As it is, I don't suppose we can get at him. But we could sue the newspaper——"

"I hardly think so. There's nothing defamatory."

"Then compel them to make an apology. If we write to the Editor and say it's a lie——"

"But it isn't."

"Well then, a breach of confidence. That's just as bad."

"Aren't you attaching too much importance to it? You can hardly blame Maynard for giving an interview to the papers. It's his only chance of getting himself known."

"You don't mean to tell me you approve?" asked Stuart incredulously.

"I can see that he had to do it."

He shook his head in painful bewilderment. "You never cease to surprise me nowadays. I'd always supposed you were a woman of taste." He tapped the paper. "This—trash——"

"You're just being stuffy and old-fashioned. I don't like the article myself——"

"I should hope not."

"But that's not Maynard's fault. And, can't you see, he *has* to use unconventional methods, if he's to get anywhere."

"Frankly, no, I don't see it at all."

"That's just like you. You claim to be progressive, but when it comes to the point, you retreat into the smoke-room of the Conservative Club——"

"I haven't been inside the Conservative Club in years."

"There's a part of you that lives there. It's all very well for you. You were born on the inside. Maynard's got to make his own way."

"He'll never do it like this." With unusual decision, he said, "I'll see to that." He brooded for a moment. Then his expression changed. He seemed to be groping through his mind for some vital fact which eluded him. "It's all rather curious. How did this fellow Lomax get on to him in the first place?"

Margaret hesitated. She was uncertain how much it was wise to tell at this stage. He would, of course, have to know in the end. At that moment Michael came in, waving a newspaper.

"What did I tell you?" he said to Margaret. "He did us proud." The sight of Stuart's obvious consternation seemed to amuse him. "What do *you* think?"

"Do you mean to say," said Stuart painfully, "that you deliberately engineered this?"

"Oh dear, have I been indiscreet? I thought you knew."

"It was my idea," said Margaret. "I thought some pub-



licity would help him. And Michael knew Lomax, so—well—that was how it was arranged.”

“I see,” said Stuart quietly. Margaret could see that he was very angry. “And you gave him permission to use your name?”

“Yes.”

“And incidentally mine?”

“I didn’t think of it that way. Really, you know, this is all rather a storm in a tea-cup.”

“It’s nothing of the sort. I consider you’ve acted disgracefully. You’ve allowed them to use my personal position as a piece of bait for advertisement purposes. You knew perfectly well I would never have consented if you’d asked me.”

This was uncomfortably close to the truth. Margaret was conscious that if a stranger had been present, all his sympathies would have been with Stuart. It would not have been easy to explain how the multitude of things which had gone before had driven her into acting in a way of which, though she would not admit it to herself, she felt ashamed. Stuart’s attitude was admirable. He did not threaten or raise his voice. Though bitterly hurt, he never forgot to be reasonable and dignified. Blessington himself could have conceived of nothing better.

And there, indeed, was the clue to what was wrong. Margaret had always felt that there was something incomplete, almost deformed, about Blessington’s heroes and heroines. They were like the creatures from another planet described by H. G. Wells, with enormous heads, globular eyes which observed with incredible minuteness, and long antennae, exquisitely sensitive to the most trivial phenomena in the world about them. They were not, like real people, muddled and haphazard, worrying stupidly over trifles and taking the most far-reaching decisions on the impulse of the moment. Even their love affairs were self-conscious and cerebral.

Stuart was like one of these people, rudely extracted from the ordered, logical environment of one of Blessington’s books, and left to find his own way among the more con-

fusing circumstances of contemporary life. He left her with the same sense of dissatisfaction as they did, as if she had been cheated of something which she had a right to demand.

She felt, too, that the impressiveness of his present attitude was in large part a swindle. It was the outer sign of a hidden weakness, like the delicate bloom on the cheeks which appears in phthisis. He was incapable of behaviour which was directly aggressive, and his thoughtful pauses were due less to consideration of opposing points of view than to a congenital indecision of mind, a paralysis of action. Within him there was as much bigotry, malice, and desire to hurt as in any man.

"I'm sorry if you don't like this," she said, "but it's largely your own fault."

He raised his eyebrows. "I must say," he observed, with studied moderation, "I don't quite follow your reasoning."

"You should have done something for him at the factory."

"Oh," he said wearily. "So we're back to that again."

"Why not? It's perfectly true."

"Is it no use my telling you it was impossible?"

"You made it impossible."

He waved a despairing hand. "Evidently nothing I can say will ever convince you." He returned to the subject of the newspaper article. "Then this," he said coldly, "was in the nature of a reprisal?"

She was beginning to lose her composure. "Oh, Stuart, don't be tiresome! Of course it wasn't."

"Then what in Heaven's name was it?"

"I've already told you. I felt I owed it to Maynard."

"I've already paid him more than adequately."

"That's the Conservative Club speaking again. You think you can settle anything with a cheque."

At this stage Stuart's self-control also showed signs of cracking. "This is lunacy! Am I to support the man for the rest of his life?"

"That's an absurd exaggeration."

"I don't know what to say. It's beyond me. You appear to

do anything he asks of you without question. You'd never have acted like this in a normal frame of mind. God knows what's come over you." He paused for a moment. His hands were clasped together to prevent them trembling and his eyes were fixed on a point a few yards to the left of Margaret's head. He said, deliberately, though with a slight tremor, "You're like somebody—hypnotised."

She was shocked into silence. By the way he had spoken and his fixed refusal to look her in the eye she knew that, when he said 'hypnotised', he did not in fact mean that, but something quite different. A look at Michael showed that she had not been mistaken; he, too, realised the implication. What took her aback most was that the phrasing was almost rehearsed. She had a vision of the inside of Stuart's mind, during those periods of quiet thoughtfulness when he was sitting on the terrace with a book, or running his fingers fondly over the keys of the Bechstein. All this time he was thinking of her, remembering certain words, certain changes in her behaviour, innocent in themselves, but adding up in his industrious, inquisitive brain to something altogether more serious. She remembered the times when they were sitting at dinner, and she would look up to see him regarding her across the table with an expression of only mild interest. What, she wondered, had he been thinking then?

Now he had decided, with this present provocation, to inform her, in his oblique manner, of his suspicions. The method of expression was ready to hand. From hundreds of carefully weighed possibilities it had been picked to serve his purpose if the time came.

She had no wish to take it as a challenge. It was too early to know where events might be leading her. It was advisable to walk warily.

"You see too many operas," she said. "They fill your head with the most curious ideas."

## CHAPTER VIII

THE RESPONSE TO LOMAX'S ARTICLE was satisfactory. After a short interval a letter appeared in the correspondence columns, a choleric, intolerant, outrageously reactionary letter. Though the writer admitted to having no first-hand knowledge of either Maynard or his treatment, he objected strongly on principle to all such forms of unorthodoxy and was shocked that it should be given gratuitous publicity in what had previously been a respectable journal. In a breathless peroration, with grammar thrown to the winds, he threatened to cancel his subscription unless an apology was made. He signed himself, 'Mens Sana'.

There was an immediate reaction from more liberal opinion. It was pointed out that Mens Sana was condemning a man unheard, an attitude deservedly repugnant to English people. Throughout the ages any new discovery had been subjected to precisely this form of obscurantist persecution. If we prided ourselves on being sportsmen . . . etc., etc. Mens Sana, who had presumably delayed the cancellation of his subscription, was not slow in hitting back. Though far from being a subtle controversialist, he had courage, and was prepared to take on all comers. He descended to personal abuse of his opponents, dropping veiled hints that they were pacifists, Communists, and enemies of society in other ways unspecified. To this Lomax himself felt called upon to reply, in a short, good-tempered and mildly ironical note, demonstrating some of the more brazen distortions that had been made and making a passing reference to the freedom of the Press and the laws of libel. At this, Mens Sana, presumably intimidated, retired from the field of battle.

"I suppose it's a good thing," said Margaret. "It gets him talked about. But, really, that awful man——"

"A friend of mine," said Michael. "I thought it might set things off."

"You arranged it?"

"Yes. Everybody loves an argument. It's important that the right side should win, of course. We had to make Mens Sana pretty unpleasant. It's brought Maynard a lot of sympathy. You mean to say you never suspected?"

"No."

"That's very interesting. When we first wrote the letters, they seemed so damned silly that we almost didn't send them. We thought it was bound to be spotted. But I suppose everybody accepts that people who write to the newspapers are mad. We had to scuttle him in the end, of course. Lomax was afraid the editor might get suspicious."

He looked at her for approbation. This was the sort of escapade which amused him and he felt he had done well. It had all been an excellent joke. But obviously Margaret was thinking of far more serious matters.

"That's fine as far as it goes," she said. "Now we've got to think of the next step."

He frowned. "The next step?"

"Yes. We've got to follow it up."

"Oh, come, Margaret," he said, "I think you've done enough. He can't feel you've any more obligations to him now."

"Oh, damn obligations! Don't you ever think in terms of anything but profit and loss?"

"Now you come to mention it, I don't know that I do."

"Haven't you any ordinary human feelings?"

"A few. For instance, I like you, Margaret. Ordinarily speaking, I never give advice—nobody wants it even when they ask for it. Unless, of course, it's advice that suits them. But with you, I'll make an exception——"

"That's very generous of you," she said ironically.

"It is. It's a violation of my principles—never to mix myself up with other people. But I'd like to help you. Not," he qualified cautiously, "that I feel passionately about it. I reserve the right to do as I please. But I'd recommend you to think very carefully what you're doing."

She began to twist the rings on her left hand. It was a habit she had when she was nervous.

"Why be so cryptic? Tell me what you mean."

He said, "What are you aiming for with this fellow Maynard?"

She flared up. "Is it any business of yours?"

"Good heavens, no. But I can see what's in front of my nose. Stuart's going to get awkward, you know."

"Let him."

"All right, let him. But you want to be clear in your mind about what you're trying to do."

The problem which he put before her was so real, so urgent, that she could not mention her resentment at his interference. She had been shirking the issue, hoping that something would turn up to make everything clear to her. Now that it was presented fairly and squarely, she was unhappily conscious of her ambiguous position.

She said helplessly, "I don't know."

"You ought to."

"Don't I know that!" she said wildly. "You talk as if it was easy. Haven't you any experience of such matters?"

"Mostly at second-hand, I'm afraid. I presume you think you're in love with him?"

"Yes—I think so." It was, she discovered, a relief to tell somebody.

"So what then?"

"I don't know—I don't know! I keep telling you."

"As I see it, you have only a few alternatives. Either he loves you or he doesn't. If he doesn't, the whole situation's a fiasco—all you can do is to write it off to experience. If he does, you can either leave Stuart and go away with Maynard, or you can decide it isn't worth it and go back to Square One. There's nothing else. There's no use in thinking you can carry on a romantic little affair indefinitely, with everybody being understanding and tolerant. This is the wrong place for that sort of thing. And they'd never stand for it."

"They?"

"Stuart and Mrs. Maynard. You'd probably forgotten her."

Indeed, she almost had. She said, "What do you know about her?"

"I've met her once or twice during the past week or two. She's a tough customer, in a very feminine way. Ready to cut off her nose to spite her face, if I'm not mistaken."

"Have you been discussing me with her?"

"No. And it's no use your getting on your high horse. I'm giving you valuable information. It's up to you what use you make of it. I should say that unless you're prepared to go the limit you ought to cut your losses and pull out now."

"You're so sensible," she said bitterly. "It's a pity you can't manage your own life better."

Immediately she was ashamed of the pathetic spitefulness of her remark. But he was not so easily hurt.

"That's hardly under discussion. Not," he pointed out, "that it hasn't been, only too frequently, in the past. And you'll remember that I've never taken offence."

"Because you never feel anything. It's hopeless to make you understand something like this. It's not a gamble on the Stock Exchange."

"There's more resemblance than you think. Maynard's an unknown quantity. He can make a success or go down the drain. And when it comes down to it, what has he told you about himself?"

She did not reply. It was true that he had told her very little. But, after all, she thought defiantly, why should he?

"All the best companies," said Michael sardonically, "issue a balance sheet."

"That's quite unimportant."

"No. It might be if you were really in love with him. Then perhaps you wouldn't care what he was like. It sounds crazy to me, but everybody tells me it occurs. But it's not like that with you. You've got an idea of him as a sort of Miracle Man and you're in love with that."

"It all comes down to the same thing. You don't believe in him."

"No. In my view he's still a phoney. And I'll bet that if I tried I could prove it to you."

"You can do as you damned well please," she said, "and so shall I. As for your advice, I think you'd be just as well sticking to your principles and keeping it to yourself."

"It's just as I've always said," explained Michael to an invisible audience, "Nobody wants it."

## CHAPTER IX

THE REVEREND LIONEL HICKS, D.D., was a Methodist minister who prided himself on a reputation for initiative. Religion, he was never tired of saying, should keep up with the times. To this end, he had spent the greater part of his life in panting at the heels of Advanced Thought like a gun-dog in pursuit of its master. In spite of this, he had not found the times so easy to keep up with as he had anticipated. Progress seemed to be averse to moving in a straight line. It turned and twisted, beckoning him up blind alleys, throwing off false scents, winding in circles, and occasionally moving sharply into reverse. Hicks had done his best. In his time he had believed so many things that he had forgotten a great number of them; and there were others which he wished to forget. He had been a Fabian, a pacifist, a vegetarian, and anti-vivisectionist. He had joined the Independent Labour Party and had stood for Parliament in a Conservative stronghold on the south coast, losing his deposit. When the war came, he had realised the necessity of changing his views. Denied the opportunity of serving his country in any of the more dramatic ways by his age, he had used his considerable energies in superintending the occupants of air-raid shelters and bullying small children into collecting paper salvage and carrying their gas-masks. He found the immediate aftermath



of the war confusing. The Labour Party were in power at last, and could hardly be called progressive at all. Russia was turning out to be a sad disappointment. He had first supported U.N.O. but was now disillusioned by it. Only gradually did the trend become apparent. Hicks became aware with a sudden shock that the soul was coming back into fashion. The theology which he had learnt in his youth had not been a waste of time after all. He took the mothballs out of his metaphysics and was pleased to find them practically as good as new. He flirted with existentialism and attended classes on Yoga. The old days of Wells and Webb, when scientific advance and the classless society were like two chemicals which, mixed together, produced the elixir of human happiness, were long since gone. Now he openly declared that scientists were destructive lunatics and called for an immediate ban on all forms of atomic research.

Through these peregrinations he had been patiently followed by a hard core of his congregation. Though they did not always agree with him, he had a certain fascination for them. He was, after all, a character, which was more than you could say of most ministers. And at his chapel there was always something going on, some new stunt which called for inspection and was food for comment. So that when he ran sex classes for adolescent girls, invited a Hindu missionary to a platform debate on metempsychosis, or painted the panels of his car with 'Where Will You Spend Eternity?' in challenging scarlet lettering, they raised their eyebrows and shook their heads . . . but nevertheless continued to attend.

Dr. Hicks was well aware of this. The public, he recognised, had no natural taste for religion as such, and to be told that it was good for them merely repelled them the more. He could not, like Father McGoffin further down the road, threaten Hell-fire to those who stayed away. Apart from any other considerations, he was not very sure whether he believed that Hell existed—even the inscription on his car was carefully designed not to commit him on this point. Yet the sight of empty pews was agony to him. He had got into

the way of treating his congregation like a wealthy and capricious invalid whose appetite must be constantly tickled with exotic dainties. Those who came to scoff, he said, remained to pray. Or, at least, remained. For only God could say whether they prayed; or whether they regarded the hymns, and the short, intimate little sermons, pregnant with homely illustrations, as the necessary price to be paid for free cinema shows and fancy-dress dances.

Though from habit he took the *Evening Telegraph*, he was not a reader of Lomax's column. But, as the hero of many an epic struggle himself, he took a professional interest in the correspondence section, and often scanned through the letters before throwing the paper aside. They were mostly poor stuff, petty wrangles about late buses and the inadequate emptying of Corporation dustbins, hardly worth powder for a veteran such as he, but there was always a faint hope of something more interesting. He stumbled on the Maynard controversy on the day of Mens Sana's second letter. After reading it, and Lomax's reply, he rushed to the cupboard where his housekeeper stored the back numbers for use as firelighters. Fortunately none of them had been used. He went through the original article several times. The description of the treatment was tantalisingly vague, but there was something about it which appealed to him. It was in line with the times. Certainly it demanded a trial. If it worked, there would be considerable credit due to its sponsors, and if not, there was no harm done. It would be, he found himself thinking in box-office parlance, a 'draw'. And it had already received a gratifying amount of advance publicity.

It was, he concluded regretfully, too late to enter the correspondence. One learnt from experience the exact point at which a controversy passed its zenith. From now onwards, if it continued at all, it would do so in a downward curve towards the ignominious point where it was curtly closed by the editor. Only a fool would intervene at this stage. But a personal meeting with Maynard might well be worth his while.

He wrote:

DEAR MR. MAYNARD,

I have read with interest the references to yourself and your work which have appeared in the *Evening Telegraph* and I should like to extend my sympathy for the scandalous, and I am quite sure, unjustified campaign of abuse to which you have been subjected. Such attacks are invariably the lot of anybody who tries to spread a little enlightenment in this unfortunate and deluded world—I have been the target of them myself times without number. However, we can take consolation from the fact that in the end truth will assuredly prevail, if we are of stout heart and do not give way to despair. For myself, I have been profoundly interested by what I have read about you. It seems to me that your conceptions are based on what the thoughtful opinion of today recognises as the true meaning of Christianity, as distinct from the barren dogmatism which has distorted it in the past. I would be glad to discuss this aspect with you further and will arrange to visit you in the near future if that is convenient. It may be that I could help you in explaining the details of your theory to a wider audience.

Maynard showed the letter to Margaret.

"Have you ever heard of him?"

"No." She looked at the address. "But then I wouldn't anyway. He lives in Crossthorpe."

There was a touch of snobbery in the way she said 'Crossthorpe'. It was a seaside town, about ten miles away, which had grown in the last twenty years from a fishing village into a noisy, flourishing holiday resort, with a concrete promenade and a pier. At one time it had been the fashionable thing to have a villa at Crossthorpe, where children could be left with their nurses for the summer months while their parents travelled abroad. But gradually the workers from the mills, rejoicing in the new-found luxury of holidays with pay, had

flowed in, eroding the dignified placidity of the place, like termites in a piece of period furniture. The wealthy had taken fright, and sold their properties for conversion into boarding-houses. They made handsome profits by this, but had nevertheless always continued to feel a little aggrieved. Crossthorpe, they felt, had let them down. They never referred to it nowadays without a shudder.

"You've never been there?"

"Not since I was a little girl. And it was quite different then. But we mustn't be prejudiced because of where he comes from. He probably hasn't any choice."

"I suppose I ought to see him."

"Certainly you should. He says he might be able to help you." She was surprised at his hesitant attitude. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing really. It's just that—I wish I knew where all this was going to lead me."

Margaret became impatient. It seemed to her that she was surrounded on all sides by a vast body of inertia, which strove to frustrate her every action on the grounds that its consequences were unpredictable.

"It's no use thinking like that. You'd never do anything at all."

"One has to be careful of arousing prejudice——"

"Oh." It dawned on Margaret what was the trouble. She broke into a laugh. "Were you worrying about old Mens Sana and the letters?"

"That was a manifestation."

"Then it's all right. I'll tell you something that'll surprise you—Michael wrote them."

"Michael!"

"Yes." She explained how the letters had come to be written. Maynard was obviously relieved, but did not show signs of finding it in the least amusing; he appeared to regard it as a tasteless practical joke at his expense. Margaret remembered that at their first meeting she had estimated him correctly in one respect. He had no sense of humour.

If anyone had asked her, before she had known Maynard, what qualities she demanded of a man, among the first of them would have been the ability to see a joke against himself. She had since learnt that love was not subject to such considerations. If he did not conform to her standards, then it was the standards which must be distrusted, not he. She began to be ashamed of her own laughter. He would think her an empty, frivolous woman.

"So, you see, you haven't made any enemies really. And you've made quite a few friends. This fellow Hicks, for instance, I should think he's the man Lomax mentioned, the one who he thought might be interested."

"And supposing he offers me anything, you think I ought to accept?"

"It depends what he offers. Providing it doesn't mean a sacrifice of principle, I don't see why you shouldn't."

"Very well," he said heavily. "I'll see what he has to say."

"Hicks!" said Stuart in dismay.

"Do you know him?"

"I know of him. He's a notorious left-winger. He was on the City Council there for a time. He was one of the prime movers in that scandal about Daviot."

"You mean when he sold all those moth-eaten blankets to the Corporation?"

"Yes. An appalling business. It was a shocking blow to public confidence. They made him out to be a common swindler."

"They had some reason."

"It was the wrong way to go about it. Pure party politics. Mind you," he said, "I hold no brief for Daviot. He's none too scrupulous, and an unctuous old devil into the bargain. But to call him a whited sepulchre in front of the whole Council. . . "

## CHAPTER X

IT WAS PERHAPS INDICATIVE of the expansiveness of Dr. Hicks's character that he should dedicate himself to the work of a Creator who, as far as physical endowments were concerned, had dealt with him sparingly. His body was strictly a utility article. As far as function went, it did most things that he asked of it. But function is not everything. On aesthetic grounds he had reasonable cause for complaint.

He was of less than medium height, and extremely bony. He had always been thin, but of recent years the adherence to a diet consisting mainly of fruit, green vegetables and shredded carrots had reduced him to a degree of emaciation which was positively pathological. He had large, flat hands, and arms disproportionately long in comparison with his trunk, so that there were always several inches of red, knobbly wrist protruding from the sleeves of his ready-made jackets. His neck was also long, and his head, on which only two tufts of white hair, standing out at right-angles at the sides, saved him from complete baldness, was in constant, inquisitive movement. It looked as if it had burst up through the clerical collar as though through a trapdoor, into a new and fascinating world. For his eyes were almost unnaturally bright.

"Mr. Maynard? So good of you to receive me."

The two men shook hands. Hicks's skin, Maynard noticed, was curiously coarse and dry, almost reptilian in consistency.

"Please sit down."

"Thank you—thank you." Hicks had a way of putting great intensity into the most conventional remarks. His eyes flickered about the room, observing, recording, rejecting, and then finally came to rest on Maynard. And in Maynard they saw almost immediately something which Hicks recognised. It was an instinctive thing, allied to the power which enables men of other walks of life to pick out the public-school boy or the ex-convict—the mark of having been subjected to a certain discipline. Hicks was certain that, at some

time or another, Maynard had trained for the ministry.

"I think," he said, crossing his legs and settling himself comfortably in his chair, "I ought to explain to you more fully why I have come. My interest was at first aroused by those unspeakable letters. Such attacks on freedom of speech are a positive outrage. I'm amazed that the editor ever allowed them to appear."

"Please," said Maynard, "don't concern yourself." In his present knowledge he found Mr. Hicks's sympathy embarrassing. "Believe me, they weren't at all important."

"I'm afraid I must disagree. I consider them extremely important. It's significant that the man was afraid to put his own name to them. I think you'll concede me that."

"Yes," said Maynard. "I'll concede you that."

"Such people must be made to realise that their rabble-rousing tactics won't succeed in muzzling progressive opinion. As soon as I read it, I said to myself—'Right or wrong, this man must have a hearing'."

"It's very kind of you——"

"Not a bit. It was a matter of principle. At that point, I had no knowledge of what your beliefs were. For all I knew, they might have been totally repugnant to me. It was only when I went into the matter further that it occurred to me that I might have a more personal interest. Mr. Lomax's article, brief as it was, seemed to indicate one thing—that you believed that man's physical and mental health depended on a realisation of the supreme significance of his own soul. Am I right?"

"Up to a point——"

Dr. Hicks held up his hand. "I know. I know. You don't like the word 'soul'. You prefer to call it something else. But that doesn't matter. We know what we mean. You needn't be afraid, Mr. Maynard, that I'm going to ask you about your religion. A man's faith is his private affair. You will not find me a bigot. So long as we have common ground on fundamentals, that is the important thing. 'In my Father's house there are many mansions'." He paused for a moment.

A cavalcade of his successive heroes moved quickly across his mind—Darwin, Shaw, Lansbury, Stalin, Mahatma Gandhi, the Duke of Bedford. . . . "Many, many mansions. Questions of creed are merely a stumbling-block between us and true understanding. If man could call out to man, from the fullness of his heart. . . ." He made a sad, disillusioned gesture. "But we are bedevilled by words. I mean that literally, Mr. Maynard. If the Devil were with us today, do you know where he would be?"

"No," said Maynard. He judged the question to be purely rhetorical.

"He would be in the Assembly of the United Nations," asserted Dr. Hicks triumphantly, "bringing up points of order. Take my word for it. But that's by the way. To get back to this point—it may interest you to know that I also have been making experiments on similar lines to your own. I have organised a series of study groups—completely free discussion, directed, of course, to some extent by myself. They're remarkably well attended, by the way. In each session we attempt to deal with some particularly urgent contemporary problem. The title of the last was, 'Attack your Neurosis from Within!' I take it that your own system has much the same approach."

"Only," said Maynard firmly, "in the very widest sense." He felt it was high time he made his position clear. Despite Hicks's repeated protestations of interest in his methods, he showed no sign of allowing Maynard a space in the conversation to explain them. "There is a very considerable technical side which was not mentioned in the newspaper at all. To begin with——"

"My dear fellow," broke in Dr. Hicks earnestly. "My dear fellow, please don't get the idea that I'm trying to compare my very amateurish activities with yours. It would be the grossest presumption. Your techniques are completely beyond my knowledge. I doubt whether I should understand them even if you told them to me. But, as you so rightly point out, we are in agreement in the widest sense, and



the widest sense is what matters. I have always striven," he said with complete truth, "to prevent the excessive intrusion of detail into discussions of principle. It has been my experience that the larger conceptions are often lost in haggling over trifles. At various times I have organised lectures in the hall attached to my chapel. I have invited speakers of all faiths, men of goodwill, when I felt they had something to say which might be of value. These are open meetings—anybody can come. I place no restrictions on the speaker. The men I have chosen have always been distinguished for originality of thought and a sincere desire to benefit mankind. In every case there has been a large attendance. I should be very gratified, Mr. Maynard," he ended formally, "if you would allow me to organise one of these meetings for you."

He stopped, looking at Maynard expectantly. Maynard saw that now, at last, he was going to be allowed to speak. He had prepared a great many things to say, but somehow the opportunity seemed to have passed. He was a man of slow and measured thought, and this type of fiercely competitive conversation threw him off balance. He suspected that Dr. Hicks was only waiting for him to open his mouth so that he could have the chance of interrupting again.

"Thank you very much for your offer——"

"It's nothing—nothing at all. I'm flattered that you should accept. I'm afraid," he said regretfully, "that we shan't be able to pay you anything —"

"Oh, now," protested Maynard. "I didn't expect——"

"You see, I don't charge for admission. I think anyone should be able to come, whatever their means. I don't want to make it a commercial proposition. I suppose," he said with obvious reluctance, "we could make a silver collection for your expenses."

"I wouldn't hear of it."

"I'm glad—very glad. You'd be surprised how mercenary some people are—" a shadow passed across his face "—even men of the highest distinction. I could tell you stories which would shock you. I'm pleased to see that you're

above such petty considerations—not, of course, that I ever doubted it.” He rubbed his hands. “So we can leave money out of it. Quite apart from anything else, you’ll get a better turn-up that way.”

“I suppose so,” said Maynard. He was not listening very intently. He put his hand to his head, which was beginning to ache, always a sign that one of his periodic bouts of depression was coming on. He wished Dr. Hicks would go.

“Naturally,” Hicks went on, “I shall look after the advertising and so on. And I can assure you I shan’t spoil the ship for a ha’porth of tar. There’s no point in having a thing like this unless everybody knows about it. And another thing—I believe you’ve written a book?”

“Yes.” Maynard pointed to the shelf where several copies of the book were arrayed. Hicks walked across and took one.

“Do you mind if I borrow a copy? We might get one of the booksellers to exhibit some around the time of the meeting.”

“I think it’s out of print.”

“See if your publishers have a few of them knocking around. And we could sell them at the door of the hall, too. No harm in that. Nobody has to buy one if he doesn’t want.”

“Just as you think best.”

“Excellent,” said Dr. Hicks, with a satisfied smile. “Then it’s all fixed. I’ll arrange with you later about dates.” As they shook hands once again, he said playfully, “Now you won’t let me down will you? You’ll promise to come?”

“Yes,” said Maynard. He would have promised anything to get Dr. Hicks out of the house.

“I’m sure I can rely on you. But it’s surprising how one can get let down. I’ve had people—you’ll hardly believe it—who agreed and promised faithfully, just as you’ve done, and a few days later, what do you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“A short note saying they’d changed their minds. No explanation, nothing. I’ll never understand such people. At times like that, Mr. Maynard,” he confided, “it’s hard to prevent oneself from becoming cynical.”

"I expect so."

"But I come bobbing up again. Fortunately, nothing gets me down for long. Tell me honestly, Mr. Maynard," he said with intense seriousness, "would you say I was sixty?"

"No."

"Well, I am. The truth is, I'm too busy to grow old. Too busy to get ill. That's the secret--plenty to do and plenty to live for. And a healthy diet. I never touch flesh." He made it sound like something raw and bleeding. "So there you are," he added cryptically. "Good day to you."

He stepped into his car and drove off, waving gaily to Maynard through the window as he rounded the corner of the road. A pleasant fellow, Iicks thought, and manifestly sincere. A little taciturn, but perhaps he would blossom out on the platform.

## CHAPTER XI

IT IS ONE OF THE FAVOURITE ASSUMPTIONS, not only of romantic fiction, but also of popular history, that large effects can be the direct result of happenings which in themselves are relatively trivial. Man seems to find something irresistibly dramatic in the spectacle of his own impotence. It is somehow exciting to think that but for a shot fired at Sarajevo, or the delayed posting of a letter before the battle of Saratoga, the whole course of the historical events might have been entirely different. On the stage, it is only recently that a partially overheard conversation, a confidential note opened in error, have ceased to be considered indispensable precipitants to a chain of misunderstandings which are ultimately resolved by a series of tedious explanations in the last act. The truth, which is that man's actions are the product mainly of man's own will, manifesting itself in appropriate circumstances, is so much more difficult to handle artistically that it has tended to be ignored.

To destroy such a strong and intimate relationship as marriage, it requires more than suspicion, more than jealousy, more even than outright dislike. There must be a definite impulse, on the part of at least one of the parties, towards destruction. Relations between Margaret and Stuart were as bad as they had ever been. He knew that she no longer cared for him, that her thoughts were concentrated on Maynard; he resented it with a bitterness only possible in one as hypersensitive and withdrawn as himself. But the thought of bringing his resentment nakedly into the open was abhorrent to him.

The initiative rested with Margaret—and Margaret was still confused in her mind. She had, she decided after much thought, no feeling for Stuart at all, not respect, not pity, not even that intangible regard which springs from habit and the contemplation of shared memories. It seemed strange that nowhere in their lives was there anything to bind them together. Even Catherine—it was as if she were an adopted child who, because she did not belong to both of them jointly, belonged to neither of them.

If Maynard had entreated her to leave everything and go away with him, it might have provided the impetus required to decide her. But he did not. The fervour of her original declaration and the qualified nature of his response had, as it were, set the tone for the development of their relationship. He never actually rebuffed her. To her endearments he would reply in kind, and when the stage was reached where words were translated into action, he showed a self-confidence and poise which she had not expected—she had always for some reason associated idealism with a certain clumsiness in practical affairs. But it was only rarely that he took the initiative, and then it was usually as a result of one of his recurrent moods of melancholy, when he needed reassurance and comfort. At other times he seemed content to allow himself, passively and benignly, to be loved.

It was impossible for Margaret to be unaware of this difference in the intensity of their feelings. It was disappoint-

ing to her. But disappointment is common in such affairs and is commonly known to increase rather than diminish passion in the more ardent member of the pair. She went through all the agonies of the jealous lover. She would be in despair at his coldness, and then persuade herself that she was hypersensitive, he was aloof merely because that was his natural manner, he meant nothing by it. At times when she lay awake in the night it would come to her with appalling clarity that he cared nothing for her at all, and that he encouraged her only because he was lonely and hated his wife. Such doubts were too appalling to entertain for long, and she silenced them with some memory of a kind word, some rare, unsolicited sign of affection which he himself had no doubt long since forgotten.

He was extremely cautious. For her, the affair was so important that she could not think very seriously of its consequences. Whatever they might be, they could not compare in significance with what she had found. She believed that both Stuart and Vera knew what was happening and she sometimes, though not very often, wondered what they thought of it. She found Maynard's precautions against discovery inconvenient and a little absurd.

"It makes me feel foolish," she protested.

"Foolish?"

"Yes. All this business of meeting in fly-blown little tea-shops and then driving out for a cuddle in some country lane. It's as if we had something to be ashamed of. But I'm not a bit ashamed."

"One has to show a certain elementary prudence."

"I'm tired of being prudent. After all these years, I've found something which really matters to me. I'm not going to be forced into regarding it as sinful."

"But what do you suggest we do?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said discontentedly. "I suppose, when you come down to it, we can't be entirely brazen—it would be so embarrassing socially, for one thing. The truth is that we're in a false position. We can't go on like this."

Maynard sighed unhappily. "It's very difficult."

"It's bound to be. But we shall just have to clench our teeth and jump. Of course, it depends how you feel. I've been assuming that you're still in love with me——" She stopped, waiting for him to reply to what was, in essence, a question.

"Yes—of course I am."

"Then you must see, as I do, that we must come to some decision. Either we have the courage to do what we feel is best for ourselves, or we give in."

"Are you suggesting a divorce?"

"What else is there?"

"It's a very serious step. I don't think we should make up our minds in a hurry."

"If you don't want me, I wish you'd say so straight away. You needn't bother to be tactful."

"Now, Margaret, please don't be unreasonable——"

"But what am I to say? You say we must wait and make up our minds. But what is there left to consider? We know the facts as well as we shall ever know them. You must have thought them over hundreds of times, just as I have. Either you want me enough to get a divorce from Vera and marry me, or you don't."

"And you? Are you quite decided that you want that?"

"Yes." She had not been decided until that very moment. Now that the time for decision had come, she felt a spasm of cowardice. She knew that she had not really considered the details of such a step at all. She had thought often of leaving Stuart and being married to Adrian, but it had been in the nature of an attractive daydream rather than a clear-cut plan. It must be done, of course; there was no doubt about that. But it would not be a bad thing to have some time to accustom herself to the idea.

He was silent for a few moments. "In principle," he said finally, as if he now decided on a line to take, "I agree with you. The present state of affairs can't be indefinitely prolonged. In the last instance, a divorce is the only way out. But there are complications. Vera, for instance. She's by

no means an easy woman to deal with. She might be very awkward—more so,” he added obscurely, “than you could imagine. I think it’s very important that matters like this should be arranged with as little bitterness as possible. I take it you agree with me?”

“Naturally.”

“Vera will need careful and tactful handling. I won’t say anything about Stuart—he’s essentially your problem. But there’s the question of money. I haven’t very much, you know.”

“Nor have I. But we can’t let that stand in our way.”

“Perhaps,” he said, “you’ve never been really short of money. It stands in your way whether you allow it to or not. Divorce itself is expensive.”

“I have a little capital. And I’m sure Stuart would give me an allowance. For all his faults, he’s generous with money.”

“Even so, I think you’ll need his goodwill.”

“I don’t propose to beg for it. But really,” she said impatiently, “all this is a very temporary embarrassment. Once you get established, you’ll be earning more than you know what to do with.”

“Perhaps.” He softened, responding to her belief in him as if to a caress. “I hope so. But it may take time.”

“Not very long. If we can make a success of the meeting——”

“I’ll agree that would be a good start. But there’s something else. Don’t you think a scandal at this point might ruin everything we’ve been working for?”

“Oh, surely not. Nobody cares about divorce nowadays.”

“It doesn’t help. But you forget that this wouldn’t be an ordinary divorce. I first met you as a patient. It’s true that, being a member of no recognised profession, I’m not bound by any code of ethics. But it wouldn’t sound good.”

This was undeniable. It was the sort of case which might well appeal to the newspapers, and it was possible to imagine it presented in such a way as to wreck Adrian’s prospects completely.

She looked at him in dismay. "Then what are we to do?"

"We must be patient. Move carefully for the moment. If I can get solidly established, the divorce might not be so damaging. And if Vera and Stuart can be induced to see it as something inevitable. . . . An undefended case is over quickly and attracts very little attention. You might even persuade Stuart to let you divorce him."

She shook her head. "I doubt it. He's not so much of a gentleman as all that, you know. And he's become very prejudiced against you lately."

"I'm sorry about that. But it's perhaps natural. There's no denying it's an awkward situation, but I'm sure we can manage to cope with it. The main thing is to be sensible and not lose our heads."

For the time, she was convinced. Later, when she had left him, dissatisfaction grew within her. The most persuasive parts of his argument were precisely those which she found most disturbing—she was uneasily aware that they were hardly characteristic of a man in love.

## CHAPTER XII

THE NIGHT OF THE MEETING was insufferably hot. It was the heat of late August, humid and oppressive, with already a suspicion of thunder in the air. Crossthorpe had had a wonderful season, but all its inhabitants were aware that it could not last much longer. The holidaymakers crowded on to the sands or walked, eight-deep, along the promenade, scantily dressed, hysterically determined to enjoy until the very last minute this unusual benevolence of Nature. At any moment now, their dream might be brought abruptly to an end, and they would stand in dripping mournful queues before cinemas and tea-shops, or huddle, in the presence of a hostile landlady, over the sitting-room fire.

Margaret would have liked to have gone alone. If it turned



out to be a failure, she did not wish to have hostile observers present. And failure was always possible, due to circumstances beyond control. Neither Crossthorpe itself, nor what she had heard of Dr. Hicks, inspired her with confidence.

Michael, however, had insisted on coming; and Stuart, after declaring repeatedly that nothing would induce him to attend, had suddenly and surprisingly changed his mind. His reasons for doing so were not clear. It was probable that sheer curiosity played a large part—he hated to miss anything. He himself said that he wished to be there ‘to keep an eye on things’ and to prevent his name being used as a reference.

He was incapable of open rudeness, but his manner towards Maynard was no more than frigidly polite; it was only on Margaret’s insistence that he had agreed to give the Maynards a lift in his car. Michael had arranged to travel independently, with Lomax. When they arrived there was some delay due to the difficulty of finding a sufficiently unobtrusive back street for parking. Stuart made it quite clear that he had no idea of advertising his presence at the meeting.

They were met at a side-door by Michael and Lomax with Dr. Hicks, who was in a state of furious agitation at their lateness. Previous defections had left him always apprehensive on these occasions, and he was never really happy until he had his guest artist actually within the building.

“I must apologise for keeping you waiting——” said Maynard.

“It’s quite all right—quite all right. A few minutes is neither here nor there. They’ve hardly settled down yet. I was only afraid that something might have happened to you.”

“May I introduce—my wife—Mr. and Mrs. Cardwell——”

Dr. Hicks shook them each enthusiastically by the hand, peering into their faces as he did so. His teeth were bared in an eager smile of welcome.

“Mrs. Cardwell? I’ve already met your charming brother—he’s gone up towards the platform with Mr. Lomax—very gratifying to have a distinguished member of the Press here—

I anticipate an extremely successful evening. Mr. Cardwell? Of course I know you by repute."

"Repute?"

"Yes indeed. You're more famous than you think, Mr. Cardwell. A business-man of liberal sympathies, a member of the Chamber of Commerce who takes an enlightened attitude towards progress—that's something remarkable in these parts. A rare bird, if you don't mind my saying so."

To a more sensitive man than Dr. Hicks it would have been abundantly evident that Stuart did mind his saying so. To be accepted as an ally—as an accomplice—by this vulgar, seditious little Red . . . ! Progress turned sour in Stuart's mouth. In truth, he had never had much of a taste for it. He was by nature essentially conservative. He had played with certain ideas because of a yearning to be different, because he had thought of them as part of the apparatus of an enlightened intellectual. He would gladly recant them all rather than run the risk of being associated with Dr. Hicks.

"You misjudge my brother-in-law," said Michael. "He's far from being a Progressive in your sense of the word. In fact, he's so far to the Right he's practically out of sight."

"Never mind," said Dr. Hicks, taking this obstacle gallantly in his stride, "it's the spirit that counts. The spirit of enquiry, the open mind. The very fact that Mr. Cardwell has come here tonight proves to me——"

"Don't you think it's time we started?" suggested Margaret hastily.

"Perhaps you're right. We don't want them to grow impatient. Mr. Cardwell and I can continue our conversation afterwards. If you'll follow me. . . ."

"Are we all supposed to be on the platform?" asked Stuart.

"Oh yes—certainly."

"I, myself," said Stuart, measuring out his words carefully, "would prefer not to be in view of the audience."

For the first time Dr. Hicks appeared to sense an atmosphere of disharmony within his little group. He gave Stuart

a puzzled glance. But he was not really disconcerted. He was interested in causes rather than individuals. He had come to accept that the motives of others were more complex than his, based on obscure personal considerations, and that they often acted strangely in consequence.

"Certainly, if you wish," he said soothingly. One had to pander to the eccentricities of rich patrons. "I can easily arrange it. It's a sort of stage, you know, with curtains at the side. We can put you in the wings, with Mr. Lomax. He has a little table there, so that he can make notes."

When they got up to the stage, he showed Lomax and Stuart to their seats and led the others out on to the platform. There was a burst of clapping, arising in several corners of the hall and gradually spreading over the whole audience. Stuart suspected the existence of a clique. Looking round the hall, it was plain that Dr. Hicks's enterprise, so impressive in other fields, stopped short at interior decoration. It was a dim, dusty cavern, with a corrugated iron roof and peeling discoloured walls. Black curtains had been drawn across the windows, to shut out the light and add an air of intimacy. Light was provided by half a dozen naked bulbs, just sufficient to cast a yellow glow over the centre aisle; the seats near the windows rested in perpetual shadow.

As for the audience, though by no means a full house, it was, for a show of this sort, a very good attendance, and reflected credit on Dr. Hicks and on his flock. Looking at them closely, it was possible to distinguish various groups. The hard core was made up of Dr. Hicks's own followers, for the most part middle-aged women. It was these who had led the clapping. To them, Dr. Hicks was a never-failing source of satisfaction and delight. He was, by a most pleasing coincidence, interested in all the things which interested them—disease, death, sex, and the inherent sinfulness of adolescence. He had even been known to deliver a passionate sermon on the excessive price of green vegetables. It was small wonder that they adored him. They were as anxious as anybody that the evening should go well, and with admirable discipline had

spread themselves about so as to give an impression of bulk to the audience.

The front rows, as if by common consent, had been left to the cranks. Margaret recognised several of these. They were the sort of people who fluttered towards any new form of medical unorthodoxy like moths around a lantern. There were the Braddocks, a pair of notorious eccentrics, whose main interest was in Theosophy; thin, wizened, and prematurely aged, they perched on the edges of their chairs and looked round at each new arrival, their Adam's apples oscillating rhythmically as they sucked glucose sweets. Next to them was Mr. Fenimore, a retired manufacturer of cooking fats, who was convinced of the presence within him of psychic healing powers. Finally, at the end of the row, sat a dramatic figure swathed in bandages—Blanche Pettigrew, a book-keeper, who, as a consequence of many years' seclusion in an inadequately-lighted room doing accounts, had fallen a victim to certain curious and perplexing delusions. For some years now she had been convinced that her whole body was rotting away by gradual degrees, from an as yet undiscovered form of leprosy.

These were hardly promising material. Nor was there anything more encouraging at the back. There sat the holiday-makers, recognisable by their peeling faces, print frocks and open-necked shirts. They stayed as close as possible to the door, ready for a hasty retreat if the show should turn out to be a fiasco, and wore a self-conscious air, as if to show that, while prepared to lend their presence to any form of nonsense for two weeks in the year, they were nobody's fools for the other fifty.

Margaret knew that she had no right to expect any more. But she was nevertheless bitterly disappointed. There seemed to be no spark of intelligence in those blank, gaping, north-country faces spread below her. They would not understand, and she knew only too well the dislike and suspicion with which they regarded anything beyond their comprehension. Adrian was unpractical—he would speak above their heads.

Perhaps she had been wrong from the start—if she had pressed Stuart enough he would have given Adrian the job at the factory; perhaps. . . . But it was too late. And, after all, tonight proved nothing. The quality of his audience was no reflection on Adrian. She looked at Dr. Hicks for sympathy. He grinned at her delightedly and then got up to speak.

Hicks viewed the audience with quite different eyes. He was too practised an orator to judge his listeners in terms of their individual intelligences. A crowd was an organism of itself, and so invariably stupid that stupidity was taken for granted. Only two things mattered—that it should be large and that it should be sympathetic. For the second, he had confidence in the battle-scarred cohorts of his Study Groups—they had stood by him in many a tight corner. For the first, the attendance was not only up to expectations—they were still coming in. In a rare access of humility, Hicks wondered why. Then he heard from above a faint drumming sound on the roof and wondered no longer. By a great stroke of luck, the weather at last was breaking. He could visualise the panic outside, the hasty rush for shelter, the streets emptied as if by rumours of pestilence. There would already be queues outside the cinemas. It was as he realised this that he caught Margaret's eye and gave her that carefree smile.

When he stood up at the rostrum, he waited for a little while for the noise to settle. There was still some shuffling as the back seats filled up with latecomers, each group a little damper than the last. They were now squashed tightly and soon there would be nothing but standing room.

If greatness lies in the capacity to discern the most important issues, and then to subordinate everything else to their accomplishment, Dr. Hicks had a certain greatness of his own. Much as he loved the sound of his own voice, his showman's instinct reminded him that he was but a secondary performer, a curtain-raiser. He spoke with his usual enthusiasm, his usual bewildering speed, but briefly. When the hall was full and the doors closed, he wound up with a grace-

ful introduction to his main speaker. It was a masterpiece of timing.

Adrian walked to the rostrum. After the diminutive Dr. Hicks he looked even taller than he did ordinarily. He was wearing a dark blue suit of an unfashionable cut. It was unsuitable to the hot weather and he wore it tightly buttoned—it was plain from the transverse creases in his coat that he had put on weight since it was bought. Yet as he stood there, in the harsh light of the naked bulb above the rostrum, he was an impressive figure. He was, Margaret thought, perfect material for a cartoonist; there was nothing about him that was not individual: the sallow complexion, the long face, the high forehead—even the shabby severity of his dress.

He began to speak, and it was as if somebody she had known before only in shadow had taken a step forward into the light. It was a light which gave vividness rather than clarity. She was conscious of seeing, not himself, but a magnified, two-dimensional projection of himself which achieved an enormous force by its very simplicity. She had been absurdly wrong in fearing that an audience might intimidate him. This was obviously the ground on which he was most at home. Here he was no longer hesitant, ponderous, melancholy. Poverty and the insecurity of his social position were forgotten. There was no risk of interruption, nor was he tormented, as he so often was in conversation, by those who wished to set the tempo of discussion faster than his own train of thought. The speed at which Maynard's mind worked, always rather too slow for brisk verbal interchange, was perfectly adapted to the more deliberate medium of public speaking. It was possible for all but the most stupid to keep up. And those who found him a little slow could always console themselves with the beauty of his voice and the dramatic tension of his delivery.

As for Margaret, she gave herself up thankfully to the illusion. The exaltation which he himself felt at being able at last to demonstrate his gift was communicated to her. She found herself back where she had started, in the sunlit

bedroom, listening in happy abandonment to the man who knew beyond doubt the answer to all her problems. The tinge of patronage which had crept into her love for him was lost.

His confidence was supreme. He turned the very seediness of his listeners to advantage, by taking control of them and giving them, temporarily, as a collective group, an importance and dignity which they so sadly lacked as individuals. They ceased to cough, or to fidget, or to rustle paper bags. They responded to an emotional stimulation which they had craved for long, without knowing it. They understood little of what he said. But radiating from him was the simple magic of faith, the seduction of a doctrine, a manifesto, a creed. For all their superficial cynicism, the desire for religion was not yet bred out of them. They sat spellbound, as their fathers had sat in days gone by, in bleak tin chapels of this very kind, deriving a strange, mournful comfort from the thunderings of ascetic divines.

In a cruder way, Margaret realised, they felt as she felt, that life as they lived it, if one dared to turn around and think, was a dull and futile thing. Somewhere, some time, a vital secret had been lost. It was Adrian's strength that he understood this feeling. He understood too, as Dr. Hicks had never understood, that the deprivation was of something deep and mystical, and could never be satisfied by Youth Clubs and Council Houses and Saturday evening hops any more than you could cure homesickness with a dose of castor oil. In the true sense of the word, Maynard was an artist. That is, he did successfully what all artists aim to do—he aroused in his audience emotions which they had never before been conscious of feeling, but which were now immediately recognised as having been one of the strongest subconscious influences of their lives.

He made no attempt to ingratiate himself with his audience. He gave them a collective character-sketch of themselves. They were, he asserted, for the most part worried, apprehensive people. They worried about their jobs, their homes, their children; they worried about politics, the risk of war,

the state of the world. They had two weeks holiday in the year and they spent it feverishly searching for a pleasure which was denied them. If they looked back over the years they would see the story of their lives, wasted by boredom, poisoned by anxiety.

These strong, unflattering words were received without protest. Towards the end of such a season as this, the inhabitants of Crossthorpe, both temporary and permanent, became afflicted with an intangible, dyspeptic gloom, as if at the close of a debauch. The transient shower of rain which had so considerably filled the hall for Maynard had been to them like the writing on the wall. A brooding pessimism was already descending on them. They were ready to accept the gloomiest estimate of their prospects.

Maynard had learnt from his incursions into psychology that it is diagnosis that captures the popular fancy, not treatment. People love to hear their own peculiarities discussed and theorised about, though in the absence of either a scientific basis for the theories or any practical proof of their usefulness in practice they hesitate to apply them to themselves. Psychology, in fact, in the twentieth century is at the same stage as somatic medicine was in the fifteenth, its pathology a mass of wild and fantastic speculations, its therapy obscure, uncouth, and ineffective.

It was hardly to be expected that on an occasion such as this Maynard should be able to give a complete exposition of his remedies for disorders so widespread, and of such prehistoric magnitude. The doctrine he expounded, though superficially impressive, was so vague as to prove on examination almost meaningless. There was a simplified explanation of his ideas on responsibility, the distortion of the personality by sensations of guilt and the compressive forces of social convention. The mind, he said, must be set free—it must be allowed to breathe, to expand, to develop. Physical diseases, flourishing in unhealthy soil, would lose their potency when the mind, in all its vigour, asserted its control. We should see more clearly, eat better, walk with a firmer step.



He gave no clear indication of how this was to be done. Instead, he said a few words on the subject of orthodox medicine. His remarks were free from the venom which he sometimes showed in private. He was sweetly and sadly reasonable. His views were there, printed in a book for all to see. They worked—he could produce half a dozen people in this very hall to prove it. He had asked repeatedly for an impartial investigation, but it had been coldly refused.

There was a good deal more. After a while, Margaret found herself growing confused. She recognised the expressions which Adrian had used in his explanations to her, but somehow the logical sequence seemed to have been lost. Assertion had replaced argument, and was supplemented by irrelevant emotional appeals. Extraneous ideas had crept in. As sentence succeeded sentence, he gradually produced an almost hypnotic effect. One was left with the sense of having taken part in something of profound significance. It was hard to say precisely what. . . .

Adrian ended on a practical note. It was impossible to explain everything in a single lecture. He hoped to deliver more—if he was given sufficient support. In the meantime, the work was going on and he was confident that, in spite of all opposition, he and his supporters would be granted the opportunity of demonstrating the importance—the urgent necessity—of applying these principles to the problems of our troubled age. The truth—he raised his hand solemnly in the air—could not be hidden for ever.

As he sat down there was a short silence. Then, as if coming out of a trance, the audience burst into a storm of applause. The impression Adrian had made was unmistakable. What converts there were it was impossible to say, but plainly the most sceptical were grateful for an extremely entertaining evening. One or two enthusiasts were standing up, beating their palms together in rhythmical ecstasy. Margaret turned a flushed, excited face to her brother.

Michael was looking at Adrian. He wore a curious expression. There was in it a certain admiration, but, underneath

that, something very close to pity. It made Margaret feel uneasy, as if he were hiding bad news from her. It was quite possible. He would stoop to the meanest form of deceit if it were convenient to him. She thought now, as she had sometimes thought in the past, that anything was preferable to such a want of trust. She would have him stupid, oafish, totally lacking in understanding, anything so long as she could rely on what he said. . . . Of course, it was not true. One needed two brothers, two husbands, two sets of friends—one for business, one for pleasure. There seemed to be no way of combining the two.

Dr. Hicks wound up the meeting. He said, "I'm sure you'll all join with us in thanking Mr. Maynard for his magnificent lecture. I think it's been an inspiration to us all. What you've heard tonight is the beginning of a campaign which may have the most dramatic and far-reaching consequences. It could mean a complete revolution in our whole attitude towards ourselves and the host of physical and psychological disorders which hinder us in our way through life. Religion comes into it too—religion comes into everything. Mr. Maynard's views are, to my mind, fundamentally Christian and humanistic, and show us a way in which medical and spiritual healing can march hand in hand. I'm confident that very soon Mr. Maynard's conceptions will be received by the whole country with the same enthusiasm as you've shown here tonight. We must think of ourselves as very privileged to have been the first to hear him." There was more applause. At the end he said, "Thank you very much. I won't say any more, except to remind you that if any of you would like to learn more about this fascinating subject we have at the door some copies of Mr. Maynard's book, *The Mind in Chains*. I may say that it's been completely sold out apart from the few we've managed to obtain for you."

The audience began to move towards the door. Michael went up to Adrian.

"Congratulations," he said.

"You think it went over well?"

"You had them rolling in the aisle. Done much of this sort of thing before?"

"Not much," said Adrian evasively. "In fact, hardly any."

"You do it remarkably well."

"Thanks. I suppose it's a sort of knack." He mopped his brow. Elation had conquered his shyness. He was almost boyish.

A few of the enthusiasts were moving in a body towards the steps leading to the platform.

"I think you'd better shake hands with a few of your constituents."

As Adrian went to receive them, Michael joined Margaret.

"What did you think of him?" she asked.

"Remarkable."

"That's a little ambiguous."

"No more than he was. Did *you* understand what he was talking about?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Well, I didn't. And if it's Greek to me, it's double Dutch to those morons down there."

"They appreciated it."

"Of course they did. It sounded lovely. Little shivers down the spine." He took her affectionately by the arm. "But let's face it, darling—it was guff. He sings sweetly, nobody can deny that. But what does it all mean?"

She said scornfully, "I believe you're jealous." He shook his head. "You can't bear the thought of him being a success. I expected it of Stuart, but of you . . .!"

As always, he was immune to abuse. He carried within him the self-justification which others searched for so desperately in creeds and theories and the opinions of others.

"He's not good enough for you, Margaret."

"I suppose you think I'll throw him over at a word from you?"

He sighed. "No. I'm afraid not. But we're all slaves to conscience. I felt I had to warn you."

"Warn me against what?"

He appeared not to hear. His eyes had wandered over to the table behind the curtain. Lomax was on the platform talking to Vera, and Stuart was left alone. He sat there with an air of elaborate unconcern, like a shy, solitary boy at a Christmas party. Margaret could tell by the tightness of his mouth, the blinking of his eyelids, that he was upset at being so ignored. In the flush of her triumph, she felt benevolently disposed towards him, even though she was certain that he had come here in the hope that the meeting would be a failure. He was too pathetic for her to bear a grudge against him.

Going to him, she said, "I hope you weren't too bored."

He did not respond to her attitude of conciliation. Stuffily, he replied, "I'm sure you don't really want to hear *my* views."

She persisted, "But of course I do. I've always had the greatest respect for your opinions."

"Until recently, perhaps."

"Stuart, this is a bad way to talk——"

"What do you expect?"

He looked at her straight in the eyes. It was so rare a thing for him that she felt strangely embarrassed, as if he had revealed something which his sense of shame had always previously led him to hide from her. His mouth was trembling and there was a moisture in his eyes which was close to tears. Was he torn with jealousy? Or was it mere vexation because the evening had turned out badly for him? She could not tell. The humiliations he suffered at minor slights were so severe, his concealment of his reactions to greater events so elaborate, that, for all her knowledge of him, his most important feelings still remained obscure to her. Put like that, it was an absurd situation between husband and wife. They had no point of contact. Surely he must realise it too?

She would liked to have said this, but, ironically enough, their very lack of contact made it impossible. In any case, Stuart might not respond. He was a man who preferred the profounder statements to be left implied. He prided himself on the delicacy of his sensibility, his capacity to divine the

atmosphere of personal relationships without reducing them to words. He liked to imagine himself as living in a novel by Proust or Henry James, where emotion quivered, unspoken, in the air, and the ceaseless drama of personality pullulated beneath the tinkling of tea-cups and the murmur of intellectual conversation.

He forced a melancholy smile. "The party seems to be breaking up."

They walked over to the others. The last of the audience were just leaving the hall and as she watched them Margaret was conscious of a disturbance in their midst. A moment later she saw what it was—a policeman was pushing his way against the stream. As he finally emerged and walked down the centre aisle, the conversation of the little group on the stage ceased. All their eyes were on the uniformed figure. Margaret wondered if they had contravened some regulation. It was plain that the others were also engaged in a rapid self-examination. Dr. Hicks had regarded the police with suspicion ever since the day when he had been arrested for painting Interventionist slogans on the steps of No. 10 Downing Street during the Spanish Civil War. Michael and Lomax had the wary alertness of men whose consciences are never entirely clear. Adrian's elation had turned to apprehension and dismay.

Only Stuart remained unaffected. As a man not only of wealth but of unblemished reputation, who drove his car with almost excessive care, he had nothing to fear. His attitude towards the police was one of cordial patronage, as if they were a private force specially maintained to secure his safety against the envy of the mob. But it was to him, surprisingly, that the policeman addressed himself.

"Mr. Cardwell?"

"Yes."

The policeman paused. He was not above extracting a momentary pleasure from the drama of the situation.

"I'm sorry to have to inform you, sir, that your house is on fire."

## CHAPTER XIII

IT WAS AN UNPLEASANT JOURNEY HOME. In Stuart pessimism had taken charge completely, and he persisted in envisaging the gloomiest possibilities. The policeman had been unable to give them any details of what had happened.

"I should imagine the whole place is burnt to the ground," he said.

"There's no reason to suppose it's as bad as that."

"They'd hardly have bothered to get me if it hadn't been serious." He looked at the sky. The night was now cloudy and humid, but fine. "It's the most damnable bad luck. If only the rain had kept on. . . ." He said savagely, "I should never have come to this meeting. Something told me at the time it was the wrong thing to do."

"Then why did you come?"

"I didn't want to let you down."

It was too absurd, a childish effort to make her into a scapegoat. She managed to control her annoyance.

"It probably wouldn't have made any difference if you had been there."

"How can you tell?" he demanded. In his present state of panic, argument enraged him. He was driving faster than usual, his shoulders hunched over the wheel, his face contorted with concentration. Occasionally he broke off his remarks to curse the stupidity of other drivers.

Margaret gave voice to her principal fear. "I hope Catherine's all right."

"So do I. I must say I think they could have sent us more information." He said sepulchrally, "Why, for all we know——"

"Stuart, please!" she interposed hastily. "It's no use thinking the worst."

"I suppose you'd rather hide your head in the sand."

"I refuse to go looking for trouble."

"Well, we shall see. But God knows what's happened to

her. After all, when the child's left there on her own——"

"She's not on her own. Mrs. Nielson's with her."

"Mrs. Nielson! She's utterly unreliable. I always said so."

"You told me you thought she was unusually intelligent."

"As a woman, perhaps. But she's not the least bit interested in her job. Now if it had been Briggs——"

"You used to pester me to get rid of Briggs."

He waved his hand irritably. "Must you make argument out of everything? When your child's life is in danger. . . ."

"I don't want to argue. But you keep trying to put the blame on me. You're so hopelessly contradictory. You don't seem to be able to trust anyone for more than a few weeks at a time." She came back to her most constant grievance. "Look at Maynard, for instance——"

"I'm tired of talking about Maynard. You think of nothing else." He blew his horn violently as he swerved round a cyclist. "I'm prepared to admit that I was wrong about him in the first place. He had a good idea but he's cheapened it. After tonight's exhibition I should have thought that was obvious to anyone."

He had been right earlier on, she thought. He had said she did not want his opinion. Though she had denied it then, she knew now that she had only wanted it if it was favourable. Naively, she had thought that Stuart would have been impressed and in some part converted by Adrian's success.

Stuart had moved his attack to another flank. "A great many of what you call contradictions are simply modifications one has to make in the light of common sense. I used to think you had a reasonably detached outlook but now I realise that, like all women, you're an extremist. You get an idea into your head and you follow it to its conclusion no matter what it costs. It's a mistake." He said, as if disclaiming responsibility for something, "You ought to think more carefully."

Then they saw the smoke. It was visible from quite some distance away, rising up on the skyline to blend with the

low black clouds; but there was no sign of flames. The worst of the fire was evidently over. As they came up the drive to the house the fire-engines came into view. There were two of them and the lawn was covered with lengths of damp and twisted hosepipe. One wing of the house, the wing containing Stuart's study and over it the nursery, smouldered miserably. A small group of people were assembled on the terrace. With a flood of relief Margaret saw Catherine and Mrs. Nielson among them. She forgot for the moment that Stuart and she were on the verge of quarrelling.

"Look, Stuart! She's all right!"

"Yes, I can see. There's no need to get hysterical over it." Whatever momentary pleasure he derived from seeing his child unhurt was submerged in irritation at having made an incorrect prediction. "We must keep our heads," he said severely.

On the terrace the maids watched the scene of destruction with avid eyes, chattering excitedly to each other. Now that their own property was safe, they were free to regard the fire as a piece of first-rate entertainment, a stroke of luck to be met with only once in a lifetime. It broke up the monotony and would provide them with a fund of anecdotes for months to come. They watched Margaret and Stuart eagerly for their reactions.

Catherine stood with Mrs. Nielson a little apart from them—after the first panic the barriers of class were beginning to reassert themselves. Catherine showed no signs of having suffered from her experience. It was all she could do to take her attention off the fire-engines to greet her parents.

"Thank goodness you're both all right," said Margaret.

"Oh, yes." Mrs. Nielson swept an untidy lock of hair out of her eyes. In her drawling voice, she said, "There was never the slightest danger really."

"What happened? How did it start?"

The nurse put her head on one side and looked at her strangely. It was as near as Margaret had ever seen her to embarrassment.



"As a matter of fact," she said with obscure emphasis, "I don't really know."

"What do you mean?"

Mrs. Nielson nodded furtively in Catherine's direction and said, "I don't like to ask her."

Stuart's patience was almost at an end. "Do you mind telling us what you're talking about?"

"Just a minute." She called one of the maids and handed Catherine over to her care. Then she led them away.

"I didn't know what was the best thing," she said. "After all, I'm not a trained child psychologist. I didn't want to do irreparable harm——"

"Mrs. Nielson, I'm asking you," said Stuart, "and I should be obliged for an answer. Who started this fire?"

"Why, I was just telling you—Catherine."

"Catherine!"

"Yes. I suppose she must have some suppressed destructive impulses or——" she waved a hand vaguely "—something."

"How did she do it?"

"With a box of matches. That's so far as I can gather. As I say, I haven't questioned her about it. I was waiting to ask your advice."

"Why weren't you with her?"

"It's bad for her to be constantly supervised. She has to have some privacy."

"So you left her," said Stuart, bringing his cross-examination to a climax, "alone in a room playing with a box of matches?"

"She always liked to play with matches. They seemed to have some special significance for her." In a slightly plaintive tone she said, "I've never known her strike one before."

"Dear God!" Stuart ran his hands through his hair. "This is lamentable."

"What I want to know," persisted Mrs. Nielson, "is whether I ought to speak to her about it."

"Perhaps you'd better not. Not tonight anyway," said Margaret. She frowned at her as a hint to leave them,

but Mrs. Nielson was not sensitive to atmosphere.

Without moving she said, "I've been wondering whether it had anything to do with those previous episodes."

"Previous episodes?" asked Stuart sharply.

"Yes, when she broke those things."

"What things?"

"I forgot to tell you," put in Margaret hastily, "Catherine seemed to get rather clumsy. She broke a few things. I didn't attach any importance to it."

"She broke them accidentally?"

"It's difficult to say, isn't it?—in a child so young. . . ."

"Personally," said Mrs. Nielson, "I'm convinced it was purposeful. And Mr. Maynard agreed——"

"Maynard?"

Nothing short of physical violence would have done justice to Margaret's feelings towards Mrs. Nielson at this present moment. It was hard to believe that such monumental tactlessness was purely unconscious.

"I asked his opinion about it—casually, as it were. . . ."

"And what did he say?"

"He didn't think there was much in it."

"It seems as if he was wrong, doesn't it?"

"We mustn't jump to conclusions. There may be no association."

"Of course there's an association."

Mrs. Nielson nodded. "I must say, I think myself——"

Stuart turned and glared at her, as if suddenly noticing that she was still there. "Please leave us alone," he snapped.

Mrs. Nielson raised her eyebrows. "Oh—right-ho. Yes, of course. I was only trying to help, you know."

When she had gone, Stuart said, "That woman's mad. We must get rid of her immediately."

Margaret was inclined to agree with him. "Certainly," she admitted, "she's a little careless——"

"Careless! She's criminal. She's a danger to society. I've a good mind to speak to the police."

She waited for him to pursue the more important question

of Catherine's previous behaviour. Margaret was conscious of having acted badly; in the light of this present incident it seemed inexcusable of her to have told him nothing about it. He had a good case for reproaching her. But he said nothing.

At the house the firemen were making tentative investigations preparatory to entering the damaged wing. Michael came across the lawn with Maynard.

"A bit of hard luck," he said, "but it could have been worse. Nobody hurt."

"Has anybody any idea how it started?" asked Maynard.

With quiet intensity, Stuart said, "My small daughter started it. She set fire to the nursery with a box of matches."

"Really?" Some of the assurance generated by the success of the meeting left him, to be replaced by dismay at the possible implications of what had happened. "That's most extraordinary——"

"I'm glad you find it interesting," said Stuart. "It's a consolation to me for having my house burnt down."

Margaret pulled at his sleeve. At any moment now an appalling scene was liable to develop. "Stuart—please—the servants. . . ."

He appeared not to hear her. His eyes were fixed on Maynard. "You may also be interested," he went on in the same tense voice, "to know that I consider you in a large degree responsible. If it hadn't been for the ignorant and ill-informed advice you gave to my wife, the child would have been properly supervised and this would never have happened. It's the merest chance that she wasn't burnt to death. As it is, Heaven knows how much damage has been done. I'm not speaking simply of the wing—that can be rebuilt, though at considerable cost. But the room beneath the nursery happens to be my study. It contains all my books my pictures, my piano."

"Surely," put in Michael pacifically, "those can be replaced?"

Stuart turned on him, striking wildly, in his agony, in all directions. "That, if I may say so," he said contemptuously,

"demonstrates your utter lack of cultural background. The Bechstein, in particular, was irreplaceable."

"You're not even sure that it's damaged yet."

At that moment one of the firemen came up. He said, "It's pretty safe now. If you'd like to come and have a look. . . ."

Without a word Stuart accompanied him into the house. The others waited in silence. The sudden drop in tension left them awkward and embarrassed.

"Strong words," said Michael eventually.

"It was outrageous!" said Margaret. "I don't know what's come over him."

She was genuinely shocked. Whatever the provocation (and she was bound to admit that provocation existed), he had no right to indulge in such an outburst. It would have been less disturbing if he had been a man of naturally quick temper. It was of no use to pretend that he had spoken in the heat of the moment and did not really mean what he said.

What was the final precipitating factor which had led him to act with such uncharacteristic violence was uncertain, though Margaret had always felt that there was something unhealthy in the intensity of his attachment to his possessions. The possibility of danger to his nearest and dearest aroused in him a querulous fatalism rather than passion.

She touched Adrian's arm in a secret demonstration of sympathy, and the physical contact did something to strengthen her. The day seemed to have been endless. As she stood there with her feet in the sodden grass and the smell of burning wood in her nostrils, the limits of her endurance were very near. So much was already harassing her—her own future, Adrian's career, her relations with Stuart—without the addition of this latest complication. There was only one thing to hope for, that with his usual pessimism Stuart had overestimated the damage to his treasures.

She saw him returning across the lawn with the firemen. It was too dark to read anything from his face.

Michael asked, "How was it?"

Stuart did not answer immediately. As he came nearer, Margaret could see that his face was contorted, as if in physical pain.

"Everything," he said eventually. "Books—pictures—the piano—everything destroyed."

## *Part Four*

### CHAPTER I

ON THE MORNING AFTER THE FIRE Margaret awoke feeling weak and listless. The multiple strains of the previous day had exhausted her; she seemed to have lived through the alternating emotions of months in a single twenty-four hours. The effect was reminiscent of the day when she had brought Michael back from Le Touquet and she was alarmed for fear it might have a similar culmination. It would be catastrophic if she were to collapse now, for she was convinced that her affairs were working up to a crisis. After last night, any hope of influencing Stuart towards an amicable settlement was faint indeed. Maynard's view of the situation, that by playing a waiting game they could achieve all their ends without friction, was founded on an obvious lack of understanding of the personalities involved. It was an index of his powers of persuasion that she had ever accepted it. There were two possible inferences to be drawn, each of them in its own way disturbing. Either he had misread Stuart's character completely, or he had made his suggestions without really believing them, in an attempt to gain time.

But what was to happen now? There was a possibility that further delay might lead them into even greater difficulties. It might be best to bring the whole question out into the open, with an appeal to all concerned for sanity and good sense. It sounded well enough in theory, but in practice she had no confidence that either Stuart or Vera would respond favourably to such a gesture.

She stayed in bed that morning, giving instructions that she should not be disturbed. There it was possible to think over

her problems without being incessantly under the pressure of events. Even so, she found it difficult to take her thoughts beyond a certain distance. There were too many unknown quantities, and the most perplexing of these was Adrian himself. What hesitations she had about taking the decisive step were mainly, she felt, a consequence of his own. If, instead of looking for difficulties, he would come to her with an obvious determination to take her at all costs, meeting the consequences in the strength of their mutual love and confidence, the whole affair would appear in a different perspective. Then, she was sure, she would know what to say.

She was expecting to hear from him some time during the day, and when he rang after lunch she was not surprised. But there was something odd about his tone.

"Is that you, Margaret?"

"Yes."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes. I'm in bed."

"In bed!" There was consternation in his voice. "You're not ill?"

"No. Just resting."

There was a short pause. Then he said, "Listen, Margaret, I'd like to talk to you. It's very urgent."

"Won't tomorrow do?"

"I'm afraid not."

"All right, then, I'll get up. If you'd like to come along here in an hour or so——"

"No, I can't do that—I'm sorry. I'll explain later——"

She frowned. "Adrian, what's the matter? You sound very agitated."

"Yes. I know. I'll tell you everything when I see you."

"All right. But where? Do you want me to come to your house? Or shall we meet in town somewhere?"

"I think the best thing would be for you to pick me up in the car, on the corner of Church Street. Then we can drive somewhere and talk."

"Oh—very well. In an hour's time, then."

"Thank you very much. I'll be waiting."

He rang off very quickly, as if relieved to have finished the conversation. It was all very strange. As she dressed, Margaret thought back over the whole conversation. The impression he had given was of a man in a state bordering on panic. When he had left her the previous night he had been perfectly normal, if perhaps a little upset by Stuart's remarks. Presumably something serious had happened in the course of the morning. What could it be? The answer came to her almost immediately—Vera. She had presented an ultimatum and threatened to sue for divorce. It fitted in perfectly. The only surprising thing was that it had not happened before.

This could be the deciding factor she had been waiting for. On his reaction to this development might rest the whole of her future life. It was an intimidating thought. She felt a slight sensation of nausea at the pit of her stomach together with a stab of self-pity. Could she not have been allowed one day's rest?

He was waiting on the corner as he had promised, looking anxiously up the road for her car to appear. His face was unnaturally pale and his hands were clasped behind his back as he peered over the heads of the passers-by.

When he was in the car, she said, "What would you like? Shall we go to some quiet place for tea?"

"I'd sooner talk in the car. Can we go out into the country?"

Out to the north of the city the industrial belt changed to seedy residential districts, then to modern suburbs, the houses growing larger and more widely spaced as they moved further from the town. After a few miles they disappeared altogether, and there was open country, stretching up north-east into the dales. In the week-ends these roads were crammed with cars, cyclists and motor-coaches, the woods alive with picnic parties. Today they were almost deserted. Margaret stopped the car in a quiet lane.

"Will this do?"

He nodded. Throughout the drive he had said nothing and she had asked no questions. Something told her that he



must be allowed to speak in his own time. She waited for him to begin.

"I'm afraid," he said in a strained voice, "a very difficult situation has arisen." He was looking straight forward through the windscreen, his hands locked together on his knees, almost as if he were praying.

"What is it?"

"That's one of the difficulties. I can't tell you. I know this may sound a little—" he felt for an appropriate word—"strange, but there it is. The actual details aren't important. What it comes down to is that I can't stay here any longer."

"Is it to do with your wife?"

He shook his head. "No."

Margaret was bewildered. She had been so certain that her own guess was correct, and that Vera was at the bottom of it all, that his denial threw her into confusion.

"Then what——?" She searched for other possibilities. "Is it money?"

"No. Please don't question me," he pleaded.

"But I might be able to help."

"There's only one way in which you can help me. Perhaps, as things are, I oughtn't to ask it of you—before, it might have been different."

"Anything I can do——" she said earnestly.

He interrupted her. "No please, don't talk like that. You don't know what I'm going to ask." He waited for a moment and then said, "I want you to come with me."

Not so very long ago, these were the words she had craved to hear. Yet now, under such strange and frightening circumstances, they left her bewildered.

"What do you mean?"

"I want you to come with me," he repeated.

"But—how soon?"

"Today—tomorrow perhaps—no later." He reminded her, "You were always against waiting."

"Yes, but this is fantastic. The divorce——"

"Oh damn the divorce! I have to go, I tell you. If you

come with me, it'll have to be without that." He looked at her coldly. "Does it worry you?"

"No. I'm not frightened of legal forms. But why won't you tell me the reason for this enormous urgency?" As he did not speak, she grew indignant. "Can't you see how unfair it is?"

"I can understand how you feel. I'm sorry."

"That's all very well. But to ask me to pack up within twenty-four hours. . . ."

She might have added that his demands were even more difficult to accept in view of his previous attitude. She could hardly convince herself that this change from caution to precipitancy was due to a sudden intensification of his feelings for her. He had not even tried to pretend that it was so. It was purely a matter of circumstances.

"If you love me——"

"I do, truly I do. And I was ready enough to give up everything and go away with you. But this is quite different. It's positively insulting. I'm to be kept in the dark, and do as you say without question. I'm given no time to make arrangements. What about Catherine? And Stuart? He's been kind to me in his way, I can't leave him without a word. I must be able to explain. And you seem to have forgotten completely all your own arguments against acting in a hurry. Have you any money?"

"Hardly any," he said gloomily.

"Well, there you are. It's preposterous."

Adrian put his hand to his forehead. "Margaret, it's no use talking like that. Everything's changed. We haven't the choice any more. I know this is hard on you. I wouldn't ask you if there was any alternative way of doing it. You must have confidence in me."

"And have you confidence in me?"

"Of course."

"Then tell me what happened."

"I can't."

There was a silence. The more Margaret thought, the

more outrageous his demands appeared. It was impossible to agree under such circumstances. There was a limit to the amount of trust one could repose in another person. She made one final effort.

"Adrian, for God's sake, what is it? Is it too bad for you to tell me?"

He sighed. It was as if he knew what he had previously only suspected, that it was no good. He had failed. "You won't come?"

"How can I, unless I know more?"

"Perhaps you can't." He spoke flatly, his eyes fixed before him. "Perhaps it doesn't matter—it might not have worked anyway. . . ."

There was a self-pitying note in his voice which angered her. He was trying to make her feel ashamed. The implication was that she had been insincere in her previous protestations of love; that when it came to the point, she was afraid.

"Adrian, I want you to know this. When I said I loved you, I meant it. I still do. But I can't follow you blindly. Perhaps I gave you the wrong impression. You may have thought I was so infatuated with you that you had only to snap your fingers and I'd do whatever you wanted, without even so much as an explanation. But I'm not that sort of woman. I suppose I might have been, just for a short time, when I was ill, but that was all. I couldn't give up my power of making decisions to somebody else."

Either he had not listened, or else he regarded what she had said as something of no importance, being utterly irrelevant to the main issue which completely occupied his mind. She was repelled by his obvious lack of interest. He did not act like a lover. He was more like a man approaching a friend for the money required to stave off bankruptcy. Once it was obvious that the loan would be refused, there was no point in staying.

"I think it's time we went back," he said.

"Please, Adrian." She took his shoulders and turned him

towards her. "Do try to understand." It was hopeless. The face she saw, with its deep lines, its forehead corrugated with the wrinkles of a habitually brooding and melancholy nature, was the face of a stranger. It was, too, and this she realised sharply for the first time now, when everything was ending, the face of an ageing man. There was little time left for either of them. The years had passed so quickly, and now they were both on the threshold of forty, still searching for a way of life. This for a while had seemed like the answer, but it was lost. Perhaps there would be no more chances.

One thing at least she had learnt, in the time she had had, to cut her losses. She started the engine and turned the car back towards the town.

"Where shall I take you?" she asked.

"Not to the house. Drop me somewhere near where you picked me up."

"Church Street?"

"Yes."

She stopped at the corner. There was a moment's pause before he moved. She said, "Shall I see you again?"

"I don't suppose so."

"Where will you go to?"

"I don't know yet."

"But your work—you'll carry on with that?"

He shook his head.

"Oh, but Adrian—you can't! And after last night. . . ."

"Last night?" Then he remembered. "Oh yes, of course, the meeting. No, that's all gone."

"What will you do? You'll have to earn money somehow."

"Don't worry about me. I'll manage."

"Adrian."

He was holding the handle of the door. "Yes?"

There was so much to say. She strove for something that would convey to him how she felt, but there were no words. Nor did it seem that he cared how she felt.

"Adrian—I'm truly sorry."

Without replying, he got out of the car. He nodded to

her, as if thanking her perfunctorily for the lift. Then he turned and walked away. He walked as always, arms swinging and head thrust forward. You would have said he was a man with an urgent appointment to keep.

## CHAPTER II

SHE RETURNED HOME. On her way out she had been in too much of a hurry to notice the damage done to the house; now she inspected it more carefully. The house, after all, was of greater importance to her now.

The wing would have to be rebuilt. The nursery was wrecked and there was a gaping hole in the floor through which the flames had penetrated into the study below. In the study, too, almost everything of importance had been damaged or destroyed. Anything that might have escaped the fire had been soaked with water from the hosepipes; a few blackened keys, wires twisted into an agonised tangle of distortion, a heap of charred wood, were all that was left of the Bechstein.

Fortunately the damage was localised. The two affected rooms were of later construction than the main body of the house and the fire had not spread. The servants were settling down, and life continued without noticeable alteration.

When the maid brought her tea, she asked, "How are things in the kitchen, Norah?"

"Very well, thank you, madam."

"The fire hasn't affected you very much?"

"Hardly at all, really. Cook was a bit upset at first."

"I suppose so. How's Miss Catherine?"

"All right, madam. Of course, since Mrs. Nielson left——"

"She's left?" exclaimed Margaret.

Norah's eyes opened wide. "Yes, madam, didn't you know? I thought Mr. Cardwell would have told you."

"No. Perhaps he didn't want to disturb me. Why did she go?"

"I couldn't say exactly, madam." Norah's manner was guarded. She could have said perfectly well if she chose, the whole affair was common property in the kitchen, but it was impossible to explain how her information had been obtained. She went as far as she considered prudent. "I think it was something Mr. Cardwell said."

"I see. Yes, of course." Margaret tried to sound as if she had been expecting it. It was a loss of face, to receive news of this sort from a housemaid. She should have been incensed at Stuart's interference in what had always been her province, but there were too many more important things on her mind.

"He said Peggy was to look after her for the present."

Margaret nodded in approval. Peggy was a good choice. She was fond of children and had often helped out with Catherine in the past. After tea she must go up and see her.

"Where is Miss Catherine now?"

"In the back spare room. Mr. Cardwell said to use it as a nursery."

"A good idea. Is Mr. Hasleton about?"

"No, madam. He went out this morning. He hasn't been back since."

"Thank you, Norah. I think that's everything. Could you bring me in the evening paper?"

When she was alone, she opened the paper and looked for Lomax's column. He had filled it with a heavily-jocular account of a country flower show. Nothing else. There was no mention of Maynard or the meeting. The flower show was poor material and had obviously been worked up in a hurry at the last moment. The inference was only too clear. Lomax had been presented with a reason for not publishing his original story. From what she had seen of him, Margaret judged that it would have to be a good one.

The same one, perhaps, that had been given to Adrian, to persuade him to leave. . . . It must be so. The coincidence

was too great. Pressure was being brought to bear. Blackmail. But by whom? Her thoughts turned immediately to Stuart. He had the motive and very probably the desire. But somehow she could not imagine him doing it; it was out of character. One would have to be forceful, unpleasant, make veiled threats. There was a risk of violence.

The telephone rang. It was Stuart's private secretary, Miss Richardson, a garrulous, buck-toothed woman in her late thirties. Margaret hated her. She was intensely inquisitive and never stopped trying to cadge invitations to the house.

"Mrs. Cardwell? Eileen Richardson here." She always referred to herself by her Christian name, as a sort of open invitation towards a more social footing. "I hope you're feeling better."

"I'm perfectly well, thank you."

"Oh, that's top-hole. Mr. Cardwell said you were in bed, so I assumed you were off-colour. I'm very glad to hear you're not. I say, I heard about your fire. Isn't it *dreadful*?"

"It is rather a nuisance," said Margaret coldly. Miss Richardson's gushing sympathy always forced her into a counterbalancing affectation. She found herself talking in flat, clipped understatement, like someone in a Noel Coward play.

"Ali your priceless treasures. It doesn't bear thinking about. I said to Mr. Cardwell, 'I shall never sleep tonight, it's upset me so badly'. And : has, too. When I think of what might have happened to that poor little toddler——"

"Yes." Margaret cut her short. "Thank you very much. It's very kind of you to be so interested. Was there something you wanted to speak to me about?"

"Yes, of course. I mustn't forget my work, must I, gossiping. Mr. Cardwell asked me to tell you he's had to go to London unexpectedly. He'll be back tomorrow night about dinner-time unless he lets you know to the contrary."

"He's already left, has he?"

"Yes. He told me not to ring you till tea-time as you might be resting. If you want to speak to him you can ring him at the Dorchester this evening."

"Thank you. Oh, Miss Richardson——" It was an odd question and would lead to gossip, but she had to know the answer. "Has Mr. Cardwell been down at the office all day?"

"Oh yes, Mrs. Cardwell, since half past nine. He's had a Board Meeting this afternoon." There was a quickened interest in her voice. Margaret could almost see her ears pricking up under the thin scurfy hair. "Why? Is there anything——?"

"Nothing, thank you. Good-bye."

Margaret put down the telephone. So Stuart was funking it. She did not believe in this sudden call to London; it was altogether too opportune. He had decided to hide out for twenty-four hours. By the time he returned Adrian should have left. The presumption that he was behind whatever was happening was so strong as to be near to certainty. But still she could not believe that he was acting alone. Apart from anything else, he had been tied to the office all day. She believed Miss Richardson's statement about that—it was impossible to imagine her missing the opportunity of spreading scandal.

So it came to this, that action was being taken to ruin Adrian, almost certainly initiated by Stuart, but with the help of someone else—she must find out who. It might have been asked, since she had said good-bye to Adrian for good, what did it all matter? Yet it *did* matter. And the inference was that she had not wholly given up Adrian. There was a part of her which hoped that if everything were explained she might win him back, on her own terms.

Soon afterwards, Michael returned home. He walked straight in, throwing his gloves on to the chair.

"Hello, Margaret, how are things?"

She did not answer the question. Instead she asked, "Where have you been?"

"Oh, down town, you know. Nothing very momentous occurred. I had lunch with Eddie."

"Lomax?"

"Yes—that's right."



"How did it go?"

"It wasn't a party, you know. Just a friendly little social occasion. Had a few drinks—talked about life——"

"Whose life?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You know what I mean." She handed him the evening paper. "Have you seen this?"

He looked at her with a convincing appearance of surprise. "Really, Margaret, you're acting very strangely. Quite aggressive. What's it all about?"

"Look at Lomax's column."

He read it and then said judiciously. "Not up to his usual standard, I should say. But what about it?"

"He's completely ignored last night's meeting."

"Oh, is that all? There could be a dozen explanations. Perhaps he wants more time to polish it up."

"Rubbish! Lomax never polished anything. It was deliberately left out."

"Aren't you losing your sense of proportion? That meeting may have been awfully important to you——" He said with ostentatious tact, "I don't want to be offensive, but Lomax is a busy man."

"What did you say to him?" she demanded, brushing aside his diplomacy. "How did you stop him publishing it?"

"But I didn't. Why on earth should you think I did?"

"Somebody did—I'm sure of that."

"What makes you so sure?"

She looked at him. He had given nothing away. His face showed only baffled innocence. But she had seen him lie too often to be impressed. And, in some indefinable way, the act was too natural, too perfect.

She said, "I saw Adrian today."

"Oh yes?" There was polite interest, nothing more.

"He's going away."

"Where?"

"He didn't say." She paused. "He asked me to go with him."

"Oh—did he?" He became serious. "That sounds a little rash."

"Supposing I told you I'd agreed to go with him—what would you say?"

He smiled. "I'd say you were a liar. You're far too sensible to do anything of the sort."

"No. That's quite wrong. I might as well tell you that I offered to go with him weeks ago. In the end we decided to leave it till after the meeting."

"And then?"

"And then I couldn't." The memory of the scene took away her self-control. "Oh Michael, you know why I couldn't! You're my own brother—why do you lie to me?"

There was a silence. In those few moments, Margaret knew, he was as near as he had ever been to giving way. The temptation to yield to the pressure of ordinary human instincts of honour and affection was strong, but he managed to withstand it. His eyelids flickered slightly with relief. He had survived another trial of strength, another attempt to seduce him from his chosen faith.

"I'm not lying to you," he said.

There was no effort to convince; his very hesitation had given him away. She must pull herself together. He could never be moved by pity.

"Has it occurred to you," she demanded, "that you are very considerably in my debt?"

He smiled and shook his head. "If you'll remember, I anticipated an occasion such as this, when we were at Le Touquet. I reminded you not to expect me to be grateful."

"It shouldn't have been necessary," said Margaret. "On your record. . . ."

"Exactly. But, as you see, it *was* necessary. It's a curious thing," he said philosophically, "that you can tell people as often as you like that your morality's different from theirs. They never really believe you."

"Very well, then. We'll put gratitude aside. I should have

thought you'd have seen the advantage of co-operating with me. You're dependent for a great deal on my goodwill."

He regarded her with unruffled good nature. "Poor Margaret, you are trying hard."

"Oh please," she said impatiently, "please drop your act for a moment. I know how you like to think of yourself—Michael the invulnerable. Nothing can touch you, nothing can hurt you, nobody can insult you. It's a pose that bores me." To her delight, a slight flush appeared on his cheeks; the amiable tolerance of his expression wavered for a moment. He had been hit. She hastened to follow up her advantage. "But to get back to the facts. I'm your only friend, your only supporter. If I throw you over, you're back where you started, without a job or a penny to your name. You're totally dependent on my charity. You don't think Stuart would keep you here if it wasn't for me?"

"No." The advantage was lost. His equanimity had never been seriously shaken. "That's quite true. As a matter of fact, I've been thinking recently that it's time I moved on."

"Moved where?"

"Back to London, I think. Provincial life gets suffocating after a time." With mild irony he added, "Perhaps you've noticed that."

"What about money?"

"I'll manage. Don't worry, too much."

"In other words, I'm to mind my own business?"

"Since you seem determined that everything should be expressed in the most offensive terms, I suppose you can take it as that."

"And you still refuse to tell me what you've really been doing today?"

He gave a long-suffering sigh. "Margaret, for goodness sake——"

"It doesn't matter," she said briskly. "I shall get it out of Stuart. He rang up to say he'd be home about six."

"But he——" For a moment he was taken in. It was a childish mistake, based on a profound lack of confidence in

Stuart as a fellow-conspirator. Seeing her expression of triumph, he shook his head reproachfully.

"You shouldn't do things like that, Margaret," he said. "It's deceitful."

"You knew he wasn't coming home tonight, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"How did you know?"

"I called in at his office this afternoon," he said carelessly.

"What time?"

"About three o'clock."

"Was he there?"

He hesitated for a split second. "Yes."

"Miss Richardson said he was in a Board Meeting."

"She's a notorious liar." He held up his hand. "I know. Don't tell me. So am I. Well, what's your story?"

"I think he's gone to London to be out of the way. When he comes back, Adrian will have gone. That's his idea."

She went to the telephone. He said, "What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to get hold of Adrian and try to get him to stay till tomorrow night. I intend to get to the bottom of this. Do you mind?"

"Go ahead."

He lit a cigarette and sat smoking as she dialled the number. She let it ring for several minutes. There was no reply. She put down the receiver.

"Bad luck," he said cheerfully. "Still, you can always have another try later on, can't you? And now what do you say to a nice glass of sherry before dinner? I'm sure it would do us both a power of good."

### CHAPTER III

SHE TRIED TO FIND ADRIAN AGAIN the next morning. The telephone was answered by the maid.

"I'm afraid Mr. Maynard isn't at home."

"Has he gone away?"

There was a pause. The voice became duller, more deliberately stupid. "I'm sure I don't know."

"What I mean is—is he just out or has he gone for some time?"

"Who is that speaking please?"

"Mrs. Cardwell."

There was another silence. Then the voice said again, "I'm sorry, I couldn't tell you."

"Is Mrs. Maynard there?"

Margaret waited again. "No, she's out too." It was said quickly, parrot-fashion. "She didn't say when she'd be back."

Margaret rang off. So Vera was in it too. There was nothing much to be done about it, short of storming the house and demanding to see her. Adrian had almost certainly gone now, and presumably alone. For she was convinced that Vera was still in the house.

There was only one thing to do, and that was to wait for Stuart's return. She felt hopelessly, miserably alone. There was no one she could trust. There was one thing about Stuart—though she was convinced that he was the prime mover in the conspiracy against her, he could be handled more easily than the others. It was not so easy for him to evade her. And he was a poor liar.

He arrived back later than expected. "The train was delayed," he said. "Ever since they nationalised these damned railways. . . ."

"Did you have a good meeting?"

"Not very," he said plaintively. "It's been a very difficult day." He began to gnaw his thumb-nail, an infallible sign of agitation. "There are times when I think I'll retire from business before the fools ruin me completely."

"What fools?"

"All of them. The directors—Adrian particularly. He's a drivelling optimist and he encourages the others to be the same. I keep telling them we're heading for a slump but nobody will believe me."

It was hardly surprising, thought Margaret, that they distrusted his judgment. For as long as she could remember, whenever Stuart had felt slightly out of sorts, it had been his habit to forecast an imminent depression in the textile industry. Just now, he was probably intending to use it as a smoke-screen to hold her off more embarrassing subjects. She was determined not to be side-tracked.

She said, "Stuart, I've one or two questions to ask you."

He frowned. "Not more trouble?"

"It's about Adrian."

"Him again? I've quite enough to worry me, without bothering about friend Maynard."

"All the same, I have to talk to you."

"All right. If you must, you must. But do you mind leaving it until after dinner? I absolutely refuse to deal with any fresh problems till I've had something to eat."

Dinner was, as always, a protracted meal. Stuart was a man of small appetite, but he liked good food and wine just as he liked pictures, music and architecture. They formed an essential part of his conception of the truly civilised life. He liked to think of himself as a gourmet. Margaret often wondered, as he tasted his food or rolled his wine around his palate with dutiful concentration, how much of it was true sensual enjoyment, and how much mere enslavement to an idea.

Throughout the meal he talked. She began to realise that his air of grievance was quite genuine. He was in a state of mind which came over him periodically when he saw himself as afflicted with more anxieties than it was reasonable to bear in silence. It did not occur to him that misfortunes which loomed so large in his own mind might appear trivial, or even downright tedious, to others; often Margaret had seen him cadge shamelessly for sympathy from comparative strangers. To him there was plainly nothing incongruous in unloading all his business worries on to her at the present time.

When coffee had been served, he said, "Now, what's this about Maynard?"

"Are you sure you don't already know?"

"Why on earth should I? I haven't seen him since the night before last."

"Would you be surprised to hear that he'd gone?"

"You're not even sure of that," Michael reminded her. "You only spoke to the maid."

"I'm as certain as I've ever been of anything," she retorted. "When he told me yesterday that he was leaving, I knew he meant it."

"Well, what of it?" said Stuart testily. "Am I supposed to rush out and look for him?"

"I'd like you to answer me," she persisted. "Are you surprised? Or were you expecting this?"

A slight flush appeared on his cheeks.

"I refuse to be cross-examined in this fashion. I can't imagine what's come over you."

"That's no answer."

"It wasn't intended to be. If you're trying to accuse me of something, you'd better say what it is."

"I'm accusing you of intriguing against Adrian behind my back."

He laughed, without any pretence at amusement. "I think friend Maynard's hardly in a position to complain on that score."

"Then you admit it?"

"I admit nothing. I simply deny your right to question me. I don't intend to go into details. But I doubt whether your own conscience is sufficiently clear to adopt such a high-handed attitude."

"You think I'm in love with him?" He did not answer. "You're quite right, of course. I suppose I should have told you sooner."

"Why didn't you?"

"I might as well be honest with you. I wasn't sure of him."

"And are you now?"

"You mean now that he's left me? You're pretty sure he won't come back, aren't you?"

He sighed. "Please stop telling me what I think. This is a most exhausting conversation." He put his hand to his head. "And after the day I've had——"

She stood up, almost instinctively placing herself between him and the door.

"Stuart, it's no use running away. I don't know what you said to Lomax, or to Adrian——"

"I didn't say anything, I tell you! I was in the office all day."

"Then you got Michael to tell them. It's all the same thing. Whatever it was, it was pretty effective. You wanted to get rid of Adrian——"

"Naturally." Suddenly discretion was thrown to the winds, overcome by a passionate sense of injustice. "Here was a man seducing my wife, wrecking the education of my only daughter——"

"And the Bechstein," she said vindictively. "Don't forget the Bechstein."

His lips tightened. "Of course I wanted to get rid of him."

"And you got what you wanted. I don't know how. Whatever it was, he wouldn't tell me about it."

As she said this she was overcome by the misery of her own situation. She sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands. It took the utmost force of her will to keep the tears out of her eyes.

He looked at her unhappily. "Believe me," he said stiffly, "I thought I was acting for the best. Perhaps it was cruel. I'm sorry."

It was what she needed. The thought of receiving patronage, from him, turned her misery into anger.

"I don't want your pity," she said. "When Adrian first came here, I told him I despised you, and it was true. I was ready to go away with him, any time. Then, when he came and asked me yesterday, I was a coward. I refused. I was put off because he kept something from me, something I knew he was ashamed of. I'd thought of him as the sort of person who wasn't ashamed of anything and it upset me. I began to wonder if I really knew him. But now I know that



I should have gone anyway. Whatever he is, he can give me something that you never can. So I'm going to go and find him—and tell him I've changed my mind. . . .”

There was a silence. Stuart's face was pale, his narrow red-rimmed eyes were like those of a caged mouse transfixed in the light of a torch. Mixed with his humiliation, she could discern the undertone of masochistic satisfaction he derived from the contemplation of his own sufferings.

The telephone rang. Michael moved quietly across the room to answer it.

“Yes. Who is it?—Michael speaking. Yes. He's—what?” There was only the brittle indistinguishable sound of the voice at the other end of the wire. “I see—I'll tell them. And keep your head. I'll ring you again in the morning.”

He put the telephone down. Then he leaned against the table and looked from Stuart to Margaret and back again, as if to gauge the possible effect of his announcement.

“Who was it?” asked Margaret.

“It was Vera.”

“About Adrian?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what, for God's sake?” she asked hysterically.

“He's been found.” He walked across to her chair and took her by the hand. She did not resent the touch. It was as if everything in between had been a game. Now the game was over. They were children again and he was the only one who could comfort her. He said slowly, “They found him on a railway line. He'd thrown himself under a train.”

## CHAPTER IV

“Now, MRS. MAYNARD, I'm not going to worry you with too many questions.” The Coroner was elaborately considerate. “I'd like you to tell me something about his state of mind.”

"Just before?"

"Yes."

"He was depressed."

"About anything in particular?"

Margaret caught her breath. Now was the time. Everything could come out, or nothing. It all depended on how Vera felt. A moment later the emergency was passed.

"I don't think so. He had moods like that."

"You'd seen him in this state before?"

"Frequently. He was always either up or down."

"So you attached no special significance to his depression?"

"No."

"Nothing," persisted the Coroner, "had happened recently which might have been expected to worry him? Nothing out of the ordinary, that is?"

"No. Certainly nothing I knew about."

That was the end, as far as Vera was concerned. It was all, Margaret thought, rather perfunctory. She herself had not been called. Michael, who had taken charge after the news of Adrian's death, had suggested that nothing should be said of the final meeting in the car. Her evidence, he had pointed out, was of no real value and could do nothing but cause a scandal which would be harmful to everyone, and not least to the reputation of the dead man. The only difficulty was Vera. She must also be persuaded to lie. But Michael was confident that he could deal with her.

Margaret was prepared to allow him to manage things in his own way. The shock had been sufficient to paralyse temporarily her own powers of decision. It was not only the death of her lover or the appalling circumstances of it; worse than that was an inescapable sense of guilt. She had allowed him to rely on her support and then, when that support was really needed, she had withdrawn it. By the time she had changed her mind once again, despair had become too strong for him and he had killed himself.

That was as good a way of reading the facts as any, if she wished to torture herself. For the first few days, it was the

only one she considered. She sobbed out her grief in secret, her face buried in pillows, behind the locked doors of her bedroom. But each day the tears grew less. Soon they lost their spontaneity, and she found herself searching for some recollection to stir them into being. It was not easy. They had not known each other for very long, and she had nothing of his in her possession to stir up sentimental memories. There was no place associated in her mind with him, no sympathetic friend into whose ear she could pour tender and nostalgic confidences.

Vaguely ashamed of her disloyalty, she began to think again. There was the future to be considered. As far as Stuart was concerned, without actually saying anything, he had made his attitude clear. He made no reference to what had been said that evening, before the news came. He would like things to carry on as if Maynard had never existed. They would return to the old life, living together in the large house like two well-established residents in the same private hotel, courteous and conversational, covering their mutual dislike with ritual enquiries about each other's health. It was better than nothing, perhaps; better than an empty life as a divorced middle-aged woman, living at home with her parents or in some Continental pension playing bridge through the sunny afternoons and discussing alimony with others of her kind. And then, too, there was Catherine.

That life was there, for the taking, if she wanted it. But could she face the thought of returning? It seemed to her that the answer to this was bound up with the answer to the other great question which was still unanswered. Until she knew what Stuart had done on the day following the fire, she could not say whether it was possible for her to live with him.

It had to be left until after the inquest. The case would be closed and there would be no chance of anything discreditable to Adrian being brought up in the evidence. Then she could go to the one person left who might tell her the truth.

The Coroner had left the unsatisfactory question of human motives and moved to more familiar ground. He questioned

the driver about the speed of the train and a railway official concerning the protection afforded to casual strollers on an adjoining footpath. The Court yawned. The two seedy adolescents in the Press box doodled listlessly into their notebooks—news, front-page news, passed by, unseen, within an inch of their freckled noses. In the well of the Court policemen, doctors, clerks, witnesses writhed in boredom and discomfort on the wooden benches. The Coroner's officer, tormented by dyspepsia, glanced at his watch and fumbled in his waistcoat pocket for a digestive tablet. During a lull in the proceedings Margaret slipped quietly away.

She had expected the house to be in some way changed. It should have seemed an emptier, sadder place. But it was much the same. Margaret was oppressed by these repeated reminders that death made little impression on any but those directly bereaved. The maid who showed her in was the one who had spoken to her on the telephone. She gave no sign of recognition.

Margaret waited in the consulting-room. It was clean and dusted and there were flowers on the window-sill. Vera was a good housewife. It was hard to realise that this room had no longer any significance. The books, the desk, the papers stacked neatly on the shelf beside his seat, the enlarged photograph of Professor Delabord, with jutting white imperial and bulging eyes, which occupied a preferential site above the fireplace—they had been not only the property, but part of the essential personality of the man she loved. Even now they were heavy with memories. Standing in their old places, they had a corporate life, like objects in a picture painted by a dead artist. Once dispersed, they would be second-hand junk, of no more value than separate pieces in a jigsaw puzzle.

She heard the front door open and close. A moment later Vera entered, followed by Michael.

"Hello, Margaret," said Michael. "I didn't expect to find you here. You could have given us a lift."

"I wanted to speak to Vera."

Vera pulled off her gloves and threw them on a chair.  
"I'm rather tired."

"It won't be for long." She turned to Michael. "I'd sooner see her alone."

Vera shook her head. "I want him to be here."

"Why?"

"I just do, that's all."

"She means," said Michael, "that you sound as if you're going to be unpleasant."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of that." She said indifferently, "I don't suppose it really matters. After all, everything's over now—pretty satisfactorily as far as most people are concerned. Poor Adrian, he didn't leave much behind him, did he?"

"That's a filthy thing to say."

"It's a filthy world. I don't wonder he wanted to be out of it." Casually, as if it were a matter of no consequence, she said, "Why did he kill himself?"

Vera did not reply. She sat down and began to pick abstractedly at a loose thread on one of her gloves.

Michael said, "Don't be ridiculous. How on earth could Vera know——"

"No," Vera interrupted. "She's quite right. I do know. When you've lived with a man for ten years. . . ." She looked up at Margaret. "But I'm afraid it's not what you want to hear. It was because of you."

"Because I refused to go with him? I don't believe that."

"Oh no, I didn't mean that. When he came to you he was desperate. He was at the stage where he couldn't bear the thought of being on his own. You may have pushed him over the edge perhaps . . . But I was thinking of something quite different." She paused, as if trying to assemble the points of her case before opening it. "You ought to have left Adrian alone. He wasn't the man you thought him at all. I don't mean that he wasn't sincere—in his own way he believed in all this rubbish he talked. He could speak well and he knew how to impress a certain type of person. But that was all."

He wasn't a great man, or anywhere near it. He was too weak, for one thing—when it came to the point he always had to be told what to do. But he wanted so desperately to be important. He resented me because I knew him and tried to keep his feet on the ground. When you came along and told him what a genius he was, he thought he'd found somebody who really understood him. Oh," she said with a sort of sad contempt, "I could tell immediately. It wasn't the first time." She looked at Margaret pityingly. "I don't suppose he told you that, did he? Naturally, he wouldn't. I knew it would end in trouble but what could I do? At first he was over-confident. He thought he could use you. Then he found you wanted to go too fast for him. He got frightened. He had his reasons for being wary of too much publicity. I tried to persuade him to be careful but it was impossible—he kept changing his mind. He'd agree with me and then, when he'd seen you, he'd go back on everything he'd said. In the end it was the meeting which did for him."

"How?"

"By being such a success," said Michael. "His only chance was to fail. I think, in a way, he knew that himself. But, poor devil, he was too good. He got carried away. Once he saw it was going over, he couldn't stop."

"I still don't understand."

"I suppose I might as well tell you. As you say, it's all over now. And I'm quite sure you suspect the worst. You see, Stuart had information, enough to finish Maynard for good. But he was delicate about using it. He hoped that the whole affair would peter out of its own accord. The meeting was his deadline. That was why he was there, to watch it flop. He was pretty upset when it didn't. And then the fire on top of that—it made up his mind for him."

"So he told you to go ahead?"

"Yes."

"And the information—what was it?"

Vera said, "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Please."

"It's not a very romantic story. It happened in Bristol, five years ago. He'd got started there, just like he did here. He was doing well—he was always good at the beginning. But when he had some success, as usual he lost his head. There was a girl who came to see him, a Miss Phillips. She was the daughter of Colonel Phillips, a local bigwig. She was poison—I could see it from the start. She was young, less than twenty, and neurotic as hell. There was some story of a love affair which had gone wrong. She played up to him till he thought he was God Almighty: he was always a mug about women. The long and short of it was, she became pregnant. Then she turned against him. He was dabbling in hypnotism at the time, and she swore he'd seduced her when she was under the influence. She wanted to bring a charge of rape. It was a nasty business." She made a grimace of disgust. "Whether it was true about the hypnotism I never knew. Personally I should hardly have thought it was necessary. But there was no doubt he was the father of the child, he admitted as much. It wasn't long before half the town knew about it. In the end they didn't proceed with the charge. Colonel Phillips was afraid of the scandal. But he made Adrian sign a statement saying he was responsible and promising never to set up in practice again. He said if he heard of him doing so, he'd send the statement to the police."

"I see," said Margaret. She must be sensible, she thought. It could hardly have been anything much less than this. Yet she was shocked, not so much by its size as by its smallness—it was such a squalid little story. Logically, it should have had no effect on her belief in either Maynard or in what he had to say. In fact, she knew that he had been right in fearing to tell her of it. Strangely enough, her disgust was not with Adrian. It was with herself, with the life she had embraced and which had betrayed her. Even with those who had hastened the betrayal she had not the spirit left to be angry.

"Thank you," she said with an effort, "it was good of you to tell me."

"So you see," persisted Vera, returning to her original

point, "you can't blame anyone else. If it hadn't been for you, none of this would have happened."

Margaret shook her head. "We all had a part. God knows, I feel guilty enough. And I think Stuart does too. But at least we made something out of it. I won't ask what was the price Michael got for using the information—I can guess."

They looked at each other for a moment and then he smiled. "Yes, you're quite right. It was the price of a new start. A thousand pounds."

"Not much for a man's life," she said bitterly.

"His career," he corrected. "I didn't expect him to kill himself. The way I looked at it, it was his future or mine."

"No." It was too facile to be believable. Bargains as simple as that could not be made with human lives. It must have been more than sheer avarice which had impelled him to do something so despicable. The thousand pounds was a symbol, like the few soiled dollars in a whisky bottle which bought the honour of a spy. The real craving must be deeper, for something more subtle than theft or forgery or murder, for the very sensation of treachery itself. And for that the money was necessary. For about betrayal for love, or even hate, there was a certain grandeur. To be certain that one had not a conscience, it was necessary to do the ultimate, contemptible thing, and not be ashamed. . . .

She saw the adoration, the hunger in Vera's eyes and felt pity for her. It was bad enough that Michael should perform such unnatural experiments on himself but to involve others in them for love of him—that was cruel. For there was no doubt that it was Vera who had supplied the information which had sent her husband to his death. Margaret said to her, "Be careful."

"What do you mean?"

"Of my brother. I don't know what he promised you. . . ." She said, conscious of its inadequacy, "He's not reliable. But then, perhaps you don't care."

She picked up her gloves and handbag and prepared to leave. The episode was over. Adrian, the Adrian she had



loved and admired, was not only dead but destroyed completely. With him went her own hopes. The pattern of her life, condensing year by year into even stronger and more rigid bonds upon her spirit, had withstood her efforts to escape from it. It was like the hardening of the arteries, the stiffness of the joints, the crystallisation of bigotry and preconceived opinion—middle age was on her like a sickness from which there was no recovering.

This was defeat, and with its complete acceptance should have come the despair she had always dreaded. It was as if she pressed the button and waited for the explosion—waited in vain. Somewhere in her chain of reasoning, there had been a blunder. Her simple explanation of the significance of events was wrong. She did not understand herself at all.

Perhaps, she thought, it was always like this; in human existence one was denied the luxury of a full stop. Only death . . . and it might be that even death was little more than a semicolon, heralding a change of pace and mood before the resumption of the same interminable story.

It might be . . . But these efforts at analysis were purposeless and fatiguing. She would sink herself into existence, do what must be done because it must be done and for no other reason. Her pride would suffer, but that must be endured. The very fact that her pride remained was of significance. Only the least important things had been destroyed. All the theories, the justifications, the fraudulent mystical humbug which had formed the support of her love for Adrian, were gone for good.

She knew, suddenly, that for this, at least, she could not feel any real regret. Adrian's ideas, she must face it, were nonsense, and he himself a pathetic fraud. She could not build a legend on that. But there remained still the basis of it all, her own desire for freedom. It had survived and would continue to do so. On some other ground, at some other time, the battle would be resumed. Though not yet.

She drove back to the house. The summer was over now. There was a chill in the air and splashes of yellow were be-

ginning to appear on the leaves. A gang of workmen were already busy repairing the damage to the burnt-out wing. Soon the rooms would be refurnished, there would be more books, new pictures, another piano would gradually replace the Bechstein in Stuart's affections.

In the evening paper there was nothing but the slightest mention of the inquest. Loinax described with benevolent irony a meeting of the Watch Committee. There was a leading article about reservoir pollution.

In the hall she heard the clattering of cups on a tray and the giggling voice of the maid exchanging badinage with the decorators. Tea was ready.







John Rowan Wilson was born in Leeds in 1919. He was educated at Stonyhurst, and later at Leeds University, where he studied medicine. He qualified in 1943, and went to sea as a ship's doctor in the Orient Line.

He gained his final surgical diploma, the F.R.C.S., in 1952.

Feeling, as he himself expresses it, "that honour was satisfied," he then began to devote his spare time to writing. The result is extraordinary, for so assured and lucid is his writing, so intuitive his reading of character, that few would imagine *A Bed of Thorns* is a first novel.

HEINEMANN